

Case of the
**VANISHING
VISITOR**



From the author of *The Enchanted, Inc. Series*

SHANNA SWENDSON

Case of the Vanishing Visitor

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Chapter One

I held my finger over my computer mouse, ready to click on the “submit” icon. “Ready?” I asked my boss. She might not still be alive, but I cared what she thought.

“What do you think about it?” Jean Jacobs replied.

I was the nominal editor of this newspaper, and I was an experienced journalist, so I should have felt confident in my work, but I hated having the question thrown back at me. Was she implying that there was something she’d caught that I hadn’t? Was this some kind of test? When I was recruited for this job, I was supposed to have been the assistant editor who would have the chance to learn the ropes before the editor left and I had to take over. But the editor was killed before I got to the interview, so I was thrown into the deep end, head-first. I wasn’t entirely certain I’d have been able to do the job if I hadn’t had Jean haunting the building and coaching me. She’d been dead for decades, but she still considered the newspaper to be hers.

“I feel okay about it,” I said, trying to sound more assertive than I felt. “It’s not the most thrilling issue ever, but it was a slow week. And it’s not as though I can uncover an exciting story, write it, and get it in the paper before we have to go to press.”

“Well, if you’re good with it,” Jean said with a shrug.

That wasn’t very encouraging, but she didn’t say not to go to press, so I clicked on the icon. I didn’t feel great about the issue, but the summer had been pretty slow. I’d had about three weeks of

good content after I busted up a real estate scam with my investigative journalism and helped catch the guy who'd killed (accidentally, he claimed) his ex-wife and her new boyfriend. Since then, it had taken all my creativity to fill the newspaper. Fortunately, school would be starting again soon, and that would give me plenty of material. Football alone would fill half the paper.

Even though it wasn't a great issue, sending it to press temporarily lifted a weight from my shoulders. Tomorrow I'd start thinking about the next issue but, for the moment, it was time to celebrate, and that meant dinner at Margarita's, the Tex-Mex restaurant down the street. It had become a weekly ritual for me to hang out there while the printing press ran. Most of the time, having an apartment over the newspaper office and press room was convenient, but it wasn't enjoyable to be up there when the press was running. Instead, I spent time chatting with the owner, Margarita, if she wasn't too busy. She'd become my closest friend in town. Thursday nights were usually quiet, so we got to have a good visit, and I often had a chance to talk to any other friends who might also be there.

I was already thinking about what I wanted to order when I left the office, which meant that I didn't notice Jordan Randall until he'd already seen me. I knew what he'd want to talk about, and I didn't have an answer for him.

I do like Jordan, but he can be a bit intense. I guess you don't get to be a tech billionaire without a little intensity, but there are days when it's too much for me. Like on the evenings when I've put the week's issue to bed and all I want is to relax with a margarita. That is not a time when I want to deal with any of his many projects.

"Hey, Lexie!" he called out as he approached.

I gave him the strongest smile I could manage in the moment and said, "Hi." My lack of enthusiasm was surely obvious in my voice, but if he picked up on it, it didn't change his behavior.

"I'm glad I caught you," he said when he reached me. My habits

are pretty ingrained, so I suspected this was no accidental encounter. He'd been lying in wait to catch me. Maybe I needed to change my routine. "I wanted to ask you how the interviews are going. Anything in tomorrow's paper?"

"Sorry, no, nothing in this issue," I said. "I didn't run across any tourists this week." When he'd cashed in his Silicon Valley billions and returned to his hometown, Jordan had focused his energy on turning the small Texas town into an arts mecca that would draw visitors, starting with a renovation of the historic downtown. His latest idea was to have me interview visitors about their perceptions of the town. I'd write features for the newspaper to show the townspeople the impact of his projects, and then he could use that material for marketing and market research. It wasn't going as well as he'd hoped because there weren't that many visitors, in spite of all his efforts, and I didn't yet know all the townspeople well enough to know who was a visitor. There had been a couple of embarrassing moments when I tried to interview people I didn't recognize whose families had been in town for generations.

He did a good job of hiding his disappointment, though his shoulders slumped a bit. "Oh. Okay. Just keep at it. I think people are really enjoying those articles. I only need a few more good quotes for the website."

"Sure thing," I said. "You know, football season will be here soon. I may be able to find people to interview if they come to town early for football games."

His face lit up. "Yes! But then we'll need to market the restaurants and galleries to the towns we're playing in home games so they'll want to come early to dine and see the sights. Maybe they'll get a hotel room and stay for the weekend." He hurried back to his office, on a mission. I might have set myself up for something in the future, but for now, I could get an evening off.

I made it to the restaurant, but it wasn't the refuge it usually was. Tonight the place was really buzzing, with almost all the

tables in the middle of the room shoved together to form two large groups. Balloons tied to the backs of chairs declared that one group was celebrating a birthday and the other was a bachelorette party. Both groups were pretty raucous, with loud whoops of laughter and a few squeals. I made my way past the tables to reach my usual seat at the bar, and Margarita gave me a quick nod as she rushed past with a tray full of tortilla chip baskets.

There went my margarita, I suspected. The town's outdated liquor laws kept her from selling alcohol, but she sometimes gave drinks to her friends. If she was busy, I doubted she'd be sharing illicit drinks. Oh well, there were still tacos. I ordered from the waitress helping out behind the bar and tried to relax in spite of the squealing from the bachelorette party behind me.

The seat next to me remained empty, and I forced myself not to focus on it because I knew that the person I wanted to sit there wasn't going to join me. On a night like this, there was no way Wes Mosby would show up. The cute local cop could hear people's thoughts, and a crowd like this was a nightmare for him. The din of thoughts added to the actual noise would be unbearable. It looked like I'd be on my own with my tacos.

I'd nearly emptied the basket of chips in front of me when a woman approached the stool next to me. "Is this taken?" she asked.

I couldn't resist one last glance toward the door, although I knew that even if Wes did show up, he'd take one look at the crowd and flee. Forcing myself to give up on him, I said, "Not at all. Help yourself."

She climbed onto the stool and glanced around. "Wow, busy place," she said. "It must be good."

"The best Mexican food in town. But no margaritas, in spite of the name."

"Too bad. I could use one. And this is sort of a vacation for me."

It struck me that if she didn't know about Margarita's, she probably wasn't local. I didn't think I'd met anyone who actually

came here on vacation, on purpose. People stopped by while out on a drive, but they didn't think of it as an actual vacation. Maybe I could get a tourist interview to go in the next issue. Jordan would be thrilled. "Really?" I asked. "You came *here* for a vacation?"

"Sort of. I'm a teacher, so I'm off for the summer, anyway, and I'm here house-sitting for a friend. My husband's on a business trip, so when my friend needed a house sitter, I figured I could make a vacation out of it. At least it's a change of scenery."

"Be sure to check out all the galleries downtown," I said. "And there are several good restaurants. For breakfast, try the Sideshow Diner, a couple of blocks from here, next to the tracks. And if you want a fancier splurge in an interesting setting, there's the Old Mill by the river." I tried not to groan out loud when I realized how much I sounded like Jordan.

"You must be local if you know all the good places."

That was the first time anyone had assumed I was local to Stirling Mills. I was accustomed to being an obvious outsider. "Not really. I've only lived here a few months, but I'm the newspaper editor, so I had to learn a lot about the town very quickly."

"The newspaper editor?" She sounded genuinely impressed. I'd have thought she was meeting a celebrity from her reaction. That was definitely different.

"Yeah. It's just a weekly," I said, trying to sound humble, "but I do a fair amount of investigative journalism—when I'm not interviewing tourists about our local attractions." I figured this was my chance, so I said as casually as I could, "I don't suppose you'd be interested in doing an interview about your impressions of the town? Not now, but maybe after you've had a chance to see things. It wouldn't take long, just about half an hour."

"Oh, that would be amazing!" she said, beaming. "I've never been interviewed for a newspaper before. But I should let you know that I'm not entirely a stranger. My parents were from here and moved away just before I was born. And my husband grew up here, so I've been here from time to time."

“That gives you a perspective on the changes.”

“Yes, I suppose it does. Well, then, if you want me, I’d love to do an interview. How about tomorrow morning? Say, eleven? That gives me time to have walked around a bit to see what’s happening.”

“Eleven is great,” I said, getting out my phone and entering the appointment in my calendar. “The newspaper office is about a block away, across the street. You can’t miss it. Can I get your name? I’m Lexie Lincoln, by the way.”

“Florence Marz—Florrie. And I’d better give you my number, while I’m at it. Just in case some big news event comes up and you need to reschedule.”

I entered her name and number, then handed her my card. “In case you need to reach me. The newspaper address is on there. I really appreciate this. You’re doing me a big favor.”

“I’m thrilled. It’ll make my little vacation more memorable. I’ll feel like a celebrity. Will you need to take any pictures?”

“Only if you want to. I don’t know yet what kind of space I’ll have available, so there’s no guarantee that I’ll run any photos I take, and what I run will be small and black-and-white. Don’t worry about getting your hair done or buying a new dress, or anything like that.”

“That’s better than being blindsided when I didn’t put on makeup.” She picked up her menu and said, “What’s good here?”

“Pretty much everything. The street tacos are the best I’ve had. But you really can’t go wrong, in general.”

We chatted while we waited for our orders and then as we lingered over our meals. More accurately, she chatted. She was a teacher in a town not too far away, and her daughter was interning in Dallas for the summer, so this was the first summer they hadn’t taken a family vacation. Her husband, Hugo, ran an alarm company. He hadn’t wanted her to come along on a business trip to a convention in Vegas even though she said she wouldn’t mind being left on her own to lounge by the hotel pool, and so when her

friend had mentioned needing a house sitter, she'd decided that a long weekend in Stirling Mills was the next best thing. Her friend's house even had a pool, so she'd get to lounge without having to share it with other guests.

"It'll be like having my own private hotel," she said. "I bought a bunch of spa treatment stuff, so I'll do face masques and all that. It'll be almost as good as being at a spa." She sounded like she was trying to convince herself. It would take a lot of convincing to make yourself believe that house-sitting in Stirling Mills was as good as going to Vegas—and I didn't even like Vegas.

"There's a day spa near here in one of the old houses in the historic district," I said. "You could splurge and get the real deal. It's hard to give yourself a proper massage."

"I'll have to look into that," she said. "I don't know what my husband would say about spending that kind of money."

"He's getting a trip to Vegas, and you know he's not working the whole time. He can deal with whatever you do to enjoy yourself. You can at least spend as much as you would have on a plane ticket."

"You know, you're right. I do deserve it. And I'm pretty sure a massage would be less expensive here than at a hotel spa in Vegas."

By this time, the birthday party had left, so the restaurant was a bit quieter, but the bachelorette party was still in full swing. As long as they were here, I figured there was no way Margarita would be able to slip me a drink, since they'd then expect drinks for their table. Even so, I wasn't quite ready to leave and face the printer noise in my apartment, so I ordered churros for dessert. Florrie had just started to say she'd have some, too, when a woman approached the bar. She gave us a cursory glance, then did a double take and gaped at us, her jaw hanging open. A second later, she recovered her composure and turned away, letting her hair fall over the side of her face, like she was hiding. Her hair was odd enough for that not to work well as a disguise tactic. It was blond

on the ends and a mix of brown and gray at the roots, with the middle a washed-out, murky blue.

I was wondering if she was hiding from me or from Florrie when Florrie quickly said, "On second thought, I think I'll just head out." She threw some bills on the bar, hopped off the stool, and scurried out, her head ducked. Those two must have known each other, and neither of them wanted to talk. There had to be a story there, but probably not the kind that could go in the newspaper.

The new woman caught the attention of the waitress behind the bar and said, "I'm picking up a to-go order for Clancy." I thought she looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place her, since she was probably in the wrong context. I knew I hadn't interviewed her, but I'd likely seen her around town. Surely I'd remember the blue hair, which wasn't that common in Stirling Mills. She didn't acknowledge me, so I didn't think I was spacing on someone I should have known. One of the hazards of having a prominent job in a small town is that people often expect me to remember them because they remember meeting the newspaper editor. I have a pretty good memory for names and faces, but I can't memorize absolutely everyone I meet, and that means I've had a few awkward moments. It was actually a relief that I was invisible to someone. She got her order in a large paper bag and left without a word to me.

At about half an hour to closing time, I'd finished my food and was nursing the last of my iced tea, delaying my return home, when the door opened and I got a glimpse of reddish hair before the door closed again. I couldn't help but grin. One look at that hen party must have sent the tough cop fleeing in terror. I'd paid my bill, so I waved goodbye to Margarita, who was still being run ragged by the party, and hurried out, hoping to catch Wes. He was half a block away by the time I got out the door, so I had to run to catch up with him. "Bachelorette parties aren't your scene, huh?" I teased.

"Oh, no, I don't need to hear those thoughts," he said, blushing.

I could only imagine.

“It’s actually relatively quiet now. Before, there was also a birthday party.”

“Yeah, I know. I tried earlier and hoped it had calmed down by now. Thursdays are usually quieter.”

“Heading somewhere else?”

“Just home, I think. It’s too late for anywhere else.”

“Long day? And no, I’m not fishing for a potential story idea. I’m being a concerned friend.”

“Just a lot of paperwork I found that the chief hasn’t been doing.”

“How long until he retires?” The current police chief had been hired because Wes was being groomed for the job but had been deemed a bit too young for it. He was more or less doing the job while the chief coasted to retirement.

“Would you believe, he said he’s having the best time of his career, so he may put off retirement for a while.”

“Oh no.”

“Maybe you could stir up some ghosts to scare him away.”

Actually, Wes’s father, the last chief, did haunt the police station, but I hadn’t thought of a good way to tell Wes that.

We were across the street from the newspaper office, and for a moment I pondered inviting him up to my place. Then I remembered that I didn’t have anything to offer him to eat and he was looking for a meal after a long day. This probably wasn’t the ideal time to make a move. Or was it? “If you want to call in a to-go order, I could go in and pick it up for you,” I offered. And then I could invite him up to eat at my place.

“It’s nice of you to offer, but not tonight. I think I’ll just head home.”

“Well, then, thanks for walking me home.”

“Actually, um, this was the closest I could find a parking space.” He gestured to the police SUV parked nearby, which I should have noticed.

I didn't know if this part of the world was prone to sinkholes, but that would have been the perfect time for one to open up right under my feet. Since one didn't, I blurted, "I guess I'll see you around," and darted across the street, barely remembering to look for oncoming traffic. I let myself in to the newspaper office, locked up and set the alarms, then made my way through the now-silent press room to the stairs that led to my apartment upstairs, where I fell onto the sofa and buried my burning face in a pillow.

I felt like Wes and I had reached a kind of understanding, but I didn't think either of us understood what, exactly, it was. I was pretty sure that something was brewing between us, and we both were aware of that, but neither one of us seemed capable of doing anything about it. I wondered if he was worried about how it might look for his job if he was too cozy with the newspaper editor. That was why I hadn't made a move. It might make for a situation even more awkward than me assuming he was gallantly walking me home, and then I'd have no choice but to quit my job and disappear during the night. I might complain about aspects of it, like the ghostly boss and slow news days, but I liked this job and I liked this town, so I didn't want to mess it up. And so we remained in limbo, with a kind of heightened awareness of each other (at least, on my part) but not doing anything about it.

The next morning, I took my time getting ready for work. Fridays were my light days, since it was nearly a week until the next issue. I usually spent the day planning the next issue and answering phone calls from readers responding to the paper that had just been delivered. One really nice thing about the slow summer time was that there was seldom anything controversial for readers to respond to. My assistant, Charlene Robinson, was taking the day off to have a long weekend for a family reunion, and I didn't have to worry about doing much of anything until Florrie showed up for her interview.

I went to the coffee shop down the street to get some pastries to serve Florrie, then made a pot of tea and sat at my desk, reading

the Dallas newspaper that had laid me off. It took all my willpower to resist the pastries while I waited for the interview. The scent of cinnamon was quickly permeating the office.

Time seemed to creep by. I thought maybe I should test one of the rolls, just in case, before Florrie got there. Not only would that provide quality control, but it would keep me from falling on them like a ravenous beast as soon as I served them. I glanced at the clock to see how much time I had, and I was surprised to see that it was already getting close to noon. No wonder I was hungry. But where was Florrie?

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Chapter Two

This wasn't the first time I'd been stood up for an interview.

People often forgot or had something come up and didn't bother to let me know. There had even been times when something bad had happened to my interview subjects to keep them from talking to me. In this case, I didn't know yet whether I should be annoyed or alarmed. I doubted anyone would try to keep someone from talking to me about their experience visiting this town, but it was possible that something had happened to Florrie to keep her from showing up. She could have had a wreck on the way back from dinner or on her way to the interview, could have choked on something at breakfast, drowned in the pool, or any number of things.

And I was now officially turning into my mother, jumping straight to the worst-case scenario. Florrie probably just got sidetracked and forgot. I'd put the appointment in my calendar, but now that I thought about it, she hadn't put it in hers.

I checked my phone for messages, in case Florrie had called or texted to let me know something had come up and I hadn't heard it, but there wasn't anything. I found the number she'd given me and called her. The phone rang several times before going to voice mail. "Hi, it's Lexie Lincoln," I said after the tone, "the newspaper editor you met at Margarita's last night. We had an interview scheduled for eleven. It's noon now, and I was wondering if something came up. Please let me know and we can reschedule."

Not that I was deeply invested in doing this interview, but being able to tell Jordan I'd talked to someone would get him off my back, and if someone made an appointment with me, it bothered me when they didn't keep it.

More time passed, and I let myself eat one of the rolls, since I didn't want to go to lunch in case Florrie showed up while I was out. She might have taken my advice and gone to the day spa, and if they were running behind, that might have delayed her. She wouldn't have had access to her phone while she was being massaged. At any moment, she'd come running in, apologizing for being so late.

She didn't. I tried calling again, letting her know I would need to reschedule if she still wanted to do the interview. I felt increasingly unsettled about the situation. She'd been so excited about being interviewed. I was accustomed to being ghosted by subjects, but they were the people who were reluctant, who agreed to the interview just to get rid of me but never had any intention of actually doing it. She was the type that had probably gone to buy a new outfit to get ready. Maybe something had happened. It might not just be my imagination spinning up story lines. It didn't have to be something as extreme as a psycho kidnapper who'd snatched her as she left the restaurant. She could have had a car accident and might be in the emergency room right now, unconscious.

"Jean?" I called out.

A moment later, her figure emerged through the wall from the press room. "What's up, kiddo?" she asked.

"You haven't heard anything on the scanner about an accident, have you? Or anything else big?" Since she was trapped in this building, she kept in touch with the outside world by monitoring the police scanner. That had the dual benefit of ensuring I knew everything that happened in town as soon as it happened and keeping Jean out of my hair most of the time.

"You don't think I'd have told you?"

"It might not have been big enough for a story. We don't

generally cover every car accident. Not unless it's a *really* slow news week."

"What makes you think there might have been an accident?"

"The person I was supposed to interview at eleven didn't show and hasn't been answering her phone. She could have had a wreck on her way here. Even if it wasn't a really bad one, it would tie her up, and keeping an appointment would be the last thing on her mind while she dealt with the cops, the wrecker, the insurance, and all that."

"Sorry, no wrecks at all. How late is she?"

"More than an hour."

"Big news? Might someone have wanted to silence her?" It seemed I wasn't the only one prone to jumping to the possibility most likely to make a good story.

"Nothing that dramatic. Just one of Jordan's chamber of commerce interviews. She's vacationing here, believe it or not."

She smirked. "Then you do need to interview her. That doesn't happen often. You may have caught yourself a unicorn. Do you know where she's staying?"

"She's house-sitting for a friend, so there's no hotel I can call, and the only number I have is her cell. I don't know her friend's name."

"I'll keep an ear out, and I'll let you know if it sounds like someone found a body." She disappeared back through the wall.

I knew I was probably overreacting, but my instincts were usually pretty good. I knew when something was big enough to be news, and I was worried about this woman who was a stranger in town. Had she drowned in the backyard pool during a morning swim? If she was swimming alone, she might have had a cramp or hit her head, and no one would have been there to help her. I shook my head. I really was turning into my mother.

I didn't hear anything from Florrie all afternoon, and worrying distracted me from my work. She was a woman on her own, and I seemed to be the only person in town who might know she was

even here, so I felt somewhat responsible for her. Late in the afternoon, I gave in and called Wes, ringing his cell phone instead of going through the police switchboard. I didn't know yet if I wanted this to be on the record.

"Lex, what's up?" he asked when he answered. As always, his deep, rich voice gave me a pleasant shiver when it went straight into my ear.

"I'm not sure. Can I run something by you?"

"Have you uncovered another criminal conspiracy?"

"No. But there may be a missing person. Isn't there some kind of time period before you can report someone missing?"

"That's a myth. A lot depends on the circumstances. What happened?"

"There's a woman I was supposed to interview this morning, but she didn't show, and she's not answering her phone. She's from out of town and was house-sitting for a friend, so it's possible that I'm the only person who would notice if something happened to her."

"You're concerned because she didn't show up for the interview? What were you going to talk to her about? Is there reason to suspect foul play?"

He sounded like he was taking me totally seriously, which both surprised and gratified me. "There wasn't any reason anyone would have wanted to keep her from talking to me, if that's what you're asking." I refrained from telling him that the interview was one of Jordan's projects. He had issues with Jordan that I felt clouded his judgment.

"Could she have had second thoughts about the interview?"

"Maybe, but she was really eager and excited about it. This was the first time she was ever being interviewed. She made it sound like a red-letter day when we set it up."

"Could have been a case of nerves. She got so excited she chickened out."

"I suppose." Actually, that was plausible. "You haven't had any

reports of wrecks or accidents, or anything like that, have you?"

"No, no accidents beyond a fender bender on fast-food row near the edge of town. What's the woman's name?"

"Florence Marz."

"Do you know who she's house-sitting for?"

"Sorry, no. The place has a pool, though. That's one reason I'm worried. What if she had trouble while swimming and she's there alone?"

"I'm sure she's in touch with her family. They'll know if she goes missing. But I've got her name in case someone else calls about her, so we'll be able to move more quickly."

"Thanks," I said. I still felt uneasy about this, but at least I'd done something. "You know, there may be something sketchy about her husband. He's on a business trip to Vegas and refused to let his wife come along."

"If he's in Vegas, he can hardly have done anything to her."

"Unless he hired someone or got someone to do him a favor. The business trip would be the perfect alibi. He's originally from here, so he's sure to know people."

He chuckled. "Okay, now you're blowing it out of proportion and looking for a story."

"My instincts are telling me there's something to this, and you know how my instincts work."

"You are usually right when you feel like you've stumbled upon a story. I'll give you that. But in this case, I think you might be reaching a bit."

"We shall see."

"I'll let you say you told me so if something comes of this. But at the moment, I'm not sure what I can do other than keep an eye out for any Jane Does who end up in the hospital or morgue. We can't send officers around to look over every backyard fence in town to see if there's a body floating in a swimming pool."

He had me there. He couldn't do much with the information I had. Which meant I needed more information. If I could just figure

out who her friend was, that would give me a starting point for a search. For that, I'd need to find out who knew Florrie. Margarita's would be a good place to start, since a cross section of the town ate there regularly. Even if Florrie had never been there before, someone might have recognized her. Since I'd skipped lunch, I went to an early dinner.

Fortunately, the place was quiet enough that Margarita was able to slip me a drink soon after I arrived. "You look like you need that," she said. "Though, actually, I think it was last night that you really needed it, since it was deadline day. Sorry I couldn't oblige."

"I totally understand. You were a bit swamped last night. I bet you were the one who needed a drink."

"Believe me, I had a couple as soon as we closed. I thought those bachelorettes would never leave. They took up three tables and they stayed all night, but they didn't order that much food, and they were lousy tippers. They just kept getting refills on their Cokes, and I suspect they were adding a little something to them. I might at least have made some money off them if we didn't have free refills or if I'd been allowed to sell alcohol. I may need to petition to get that law changed. The people at the Old Mill may join me on that, and I bet Jordan would back me because it would help his tourism plans."

"I can write an editorial calling for the law to change and bring us in line with the rest of the state."

"You'd get crucified by half the town."

"And sainted by the other half. I think I can deal with it. The ones who'd be happy are more fun."

"Probably!" she said with a laugh. "Now, what's up? You look worried."

"An interview subject seems to have vanished on me."

"Whistleblower? Do you think someone's trying to silence her?"

My knack for uncovering corruption seemed to have given the entire town the same idea. "No, just one of Jordan's tourist things. Which, in a way, is more alarming. I'd understand a whistleblower

changing her mind and ghosting me, but this woman was really excited, and not only did she not show, but she's not answering her phone or returning calls. I'm worried that something might have happened to her since she's in town alone."

"Wait, she's actually here visiting, like on vacation? Here?"

"Yeah, believe it or not. Well, really she's house-sitting, but she's treating it like a vacation."

"Does Jordan know? Are you sure he hasn't kidnapped her to give her the hard sell on Stirling Mills as a destination?"

I couldn't help but laugh because I could picture it. "That's a possibility I hadn't considered. She may be trapped in the back seat of his Tesla as he drives her around to see all the sites. More seriously, Wes says there haven't been any car accidents that sent anyone to the hospital. What I'm worried about is that she said the house where she's staying has a pool, and if something happened while she was swimming alone, no one may know. The problem is that I don't know who she's house-sitting for, so I can't even send anyone to check. I'm hoping maybe someone here knows who she is and might know who her local friends and family are."

"What's her name?"

"Florence Marz. Her parents were apparently from here, and so is her husband. I think she said his name was Hugo."

She shook her head. "Sorry. Doesn't ring a bell. What did she look like?"

"You saw her. It was the woman I was sitting next to last night."

She frowned, like she was trying to recall. "I don't remember you sitting with anyone last night. The seats on either side of you were empty."

Chapter Three

A shiver went down my spine, but I shook it off. I knew I'd been talking to someone. A lot of weird stuff happened in this town, but I didn't think this fell into that category. Then again, there had been no sign of Florrie since then. But no, I *knew* I'd spent the evening talking to a woman. "Seriously, you didn't see the woman who sat next to me all evening?" I pointed to the seat where Florrie had been. I could vividly picture her there. "She got the street tacos with a side salad and iced tea. She didn't finish her chips." Which, I supposed, could have been a sign that she was not of this world.

Margarita shrugged. "Sorry. I'm not sure I'd have noticed my own mother if she'd been in here last night. We had those two big parties and I was down a waitress because Helena broke a glass at the beginning of her shift, cut herself, and ended up at urgent care, getting stitches. I had nightmares about bridesmaids last night. Those girls kept me running the whole time, and it took everything I had to stay nice to them. That gave me tunnel vision. And then the crew wound down with a few drinks last night after we closed. I was too tired to make margaritas, so we just did tequila shots. My memory of the whole night is, fortunately, blurry."

"From what I saw of that group, I can't blame you," I said, wincing.

"So, this woman ghosted you?" She glanced around to make sure no one was eavesdropping, then moved closer to me and

whispered, “Are you sure she didn’t literally *ghost* you?”

“I’m pretty sure she was alive,” I said. Having the ability to see and hear ghosts meant that I did sometimes see people others didn’t, but it was pretty obvious when I was talking to a ghost rather than a living person. It’s not the sort of thing that’s easy to confuse. “I’ve never had a ghost give me a phone number before, and the number worked.” Now that I thought about it, though, there had been a generic voice mail greeting, not one she’d recorded herself. I could have been calling anyone. I had no way of knowing whom I’d been calling. But then something else occurred to me. “If someone was haunting your restaurant, I probably would have seen her in here before. I’d have seen the ghost, or if she’d just died and the place meant enough to her for her to haunt it, I’d have seen her in here while she was alive.” Remembering something from our conversation, I said, “She hadn’t been here before. She asked me what was good, and then she ordered it—and ate it.”

“Okay, so real, living person.” But she didn’t sound entirely convinced. Turning to the waitress who was headed back to the kitchen after delivering a tray full of plates, she said, “Hey, Josie, you covered the bar last night, right? Did you know the woman who was sitting next to Lexie?”

Josie frowned. “I don’t know. Last night’s kind of a blur. I don’t remember a woman other than Lexie sitting at the bar. What did she look like?”

I started to answer, but paused when I realized I didn’t truly remember. I’d spent the whole evening talking to the woman, and I didn’t have a clear mental image. I was sure I’d recognize her if she walked in, but I couldn’t describe her in a way that anyone else would recognize. “She was late forties, maybe. She’s got a kid in college, so that would be the right age. Light brown hair, possibly a bit of gray. Or that could have been the light. I guess her hair was short, or maybe medium-length. Not curly, but I don’t think it was straight. Average height and build, I guess. I don’t know what

color her eyes were. I think she had on glasses.” Half the women in the place, including at least one of the bachelorette party members, might have fit that description. If I had to work with a police sketch artist, I’d be stumped because I honestly couldn’t remember her face. It was sort of a face-shaped blob in my mind’s eye, like when they blur the face on a photo they show in a TV news story.

Josie shook her head. “I have no idea. We were in the weeds last night. I barely remember serving you, and I know you because you’re a regular. I’m sure there must have been someone sitting by you, but I’m afraid I can’t help you.” She glanced at Margarita, who gave her a nod, and she headed back to the kitchen.

“Do you have security cameras that might have caught her?” I asked Margarita.

“Sorry, no. I only have them on after hours in case of a break-in. It feels weird to spy on my customers while they’re here. The only camera’s on the cash register.”

“So I can’t prove that I was talking to someone alive, and I can’t get a picture of her to show around.”

“Do you think something’s wrong?” I loved that after her initial question, she was taking this seriously and not talking as though she was merely humoring me.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Wes would say I’m making a mountain out of a molehill during a slow news week, and he didn’t think this counted as a missing person case, but she seemed super excited to be interviewed, so I’m worried that she didn’t show up and isn’t answering her phone. Like I said, she’s on her own here in town, so I feel a bit responsible for her as the only person who seems to know she’s here. Women need to look out for each other.”

“If something’s really wrong, surely her family will notice and do something.”

“Yeah, of course.” Though I wasn’t sure. When I was interning, I didn’t check in with my parents that often. We did a regular Sunday-afternoon phone call, and if her daughter was anything like me, it meant it would be a couple of days before she might notice

something was wrong. As for her husband, if he didn't want his wife coming along on a business trip to Vegas, I doubted he'd be calling nightly to check in and would be glad rather than worried if she didn't call him. And that was if he wasn't behind her disappearance. Wes might have scoffed at that theory, and even I hadn't been totally serious about it, but if he had friends and family in Stirling Mills, he might have been able to arrange something to get his wife out of the way while he had the perfect alibi of being in Vegas.

And now even I thought I was getting a bit ridiculous about this. "I probably am blowing it out of proportion because I don't like being stood up," I said with a laugh.

"Still worried about your missing interview?" Wes asked, taking the seat next to me, the one where Florrie had sat the night before.

"Yeah, a bit," I admitted. "I never did hear from her."

"Well, maybe something came up and she got sidetracked seeing all the exciting sights here in beautiful Stirling Mills," Wes said dryly. Dropping his voice, he added, "Are you sure she was, you know, alive?"

"I'm pretty sure. I've never seen a ghost eat tacos."

Unless they were ghost tacos, a memory of a long-ago meal. No, I couldn't start doubting myself on this. Every ghost I'd met, I'd been sure of what they were. Jean was about the most solid and real ghost I'd seen, and even she was clearly a ghost. I didn't think I could have dinner with a ghost without realizing it.

"Oh well. Enough about that," I said. "Now, what should I have for dinner tonight?" I picked up the menu and scanned it, even though I pretty much had it memorized. I felt a bit silly for making such a big deal out of this, but my instincts told me something was wrong, and they were usually good. That was how I always got the story. This seemed like a story to me, deep in my gut where my instincts spoke to me.

Besides, what harm could a little research do?

BY THE NEXT MORNING, I'd almost forgotten about Florrie. After dinner the night before, Margarita and I caught the late show at the downtown movie theater, then I'd slept late and gone to the town's diner for a big, late breakfast. After that, I headed to the grocery store to restock. I was trying to be better about eating at home because a diet of Tex-Mex restaurant fare probably wasn't great for me. I figured if I ate veggies at home most of the time, having tacos and enchiladas a few nights a week wouldn't kill me. And if I had food in the house, then the next time Wes was hungry and Margarita's was too crowded for him, I could invite him up. Okay, so I'd also have to learn to cook, but I was working on that. My goal was to learn to cook one new meal a week, and I'd found some good online tutorials.

As I waited in line at the checkout with a cart full of unfamiliar foods from my recipe shopping list, I thought the checker looked familiar—and not because I saw her all the time at the store. I'd seen her somewhere else recently, out of context. She was tall and sturdy, the kind of woman who'd look right at home in a brass breastplate and a helmet with horns on it. Instead, she wore a baseball cap with the store's logo on it. Bleached-looking ends stuck out from beneath the cap in a ponytail that was darker where it disappeared under the hat. I tried picturing her in other situations and not wearing the store's uniform, and finally it struck me: She was the woman who'd come in for a take-out order around the time Florrie left the restaurant. She and Florrie had definitely made eye contact, and I was pretty sure that this woman had turned away to avoid interacting with Florrie, and then Florrie had quickly left. That more than likely meant she knew who Florrie was.

When I got up to the register, I greeted her and assured her that I'd found everything just fine before saying, "Hey, you were at Margarita's the other night. You came in to get a take-out order."

She paused in scanning my groceries and gave me a wary look. “Yeah.”

I realized how creepy that must have sounded and hurried to say, “Sorry, it’s just that you looked familiar then, and I couldn’t place you, but now that I see you here, I realize why I knew you. I guess I should have said hi anyway, and I feel bad that I didn’t. I’m sorry about that.”

The checker, whose name tag said “Cissy,” shook her head and said. “It’s no biggie. I see everyone come through here, and I don’t know them away from the store. I didn’t recognize you.”

“Good point. But I think you did recognize the woman I was sitting next to. I’ve been trying to track her down. Maybe you could help me.”

Cissy froze. She got a deer-in-the-headlights look, and I was pretty sure she was even holding her breath. Then she said, “No, I didn’t see anyone sitting by you.”

A chill went down my spine and I had to stop myself from shivering visibly. This was the third person who’d said she hadn’t seen me sitting with anyone. Margarita and Josie had admitted that they’d been busy and might not have noticed or remembered, but I knew Cissy had looked right at Florrie and recognized her. Either she was lying or she had the same ability to see ghosts that I had and Florrie was actually a ghost.

Pulling myself together, I said, “Rats. I needed to track her down for something, and no one seems to know her. I figured you see just about everyone in town come through here, so it was worth a shot. She must have taken off before you got there, or it was too crowded for you to notice her. Thanks, anyway.”

She didn’t speak other than to tell me the total and thank me for shopping when she handed me my receipt. I got the weirdest feeling that I’d touched a nerve. Was it just that she didn’t like being recognized during her free time, had she seen Florrie and had a reason not to want to admit it, or did she see ghosts and didn’t want to admit that? If it was the latter, I could totally

understand. I wouldn't tell a stranger, either, especially not in public. But I needed to know which of these possibilities was the truth. Had I seen a ghost, or was there a real woman who was now missing? The more I learned, the more I found myself doubting my own experience.

After I got my groceries put away at home, I went down to the newspaper office. If Florrie's husband was from Stirling Mills, there should have been a wedding announcement in the paper, and if she had a kid in college, their wedding might have been recent enough for it to be in our online archives. I fired up my computer and typed the name "Marz" in the search box.

I got a lot of results. The Marz family seemed to be pretty big in this town. I added the word "wedding" to the search and still got a couple of pages of results. It would have helped if I'd known Florrie's maiden name because all the headlines were along the lines of "Smith, Marz Married." I adjusted the date parameters to rule out the last ten years, then clicked on each article until I found a notice for the wedding of Hugo Marz of Stirling Mills and Florence Rogers. It was a small article with a tiny, blurry photo of the couple, but I felt vindicated by the proof that Florence Marz existed.

Or had existed. I supposed there was nothing to say that she was still alive. I could have been talking to her ghost. While I'd told Margarita that I'd have seen Florence before if she was haunting the restaurant, that wasn't necessarily true. Sometimes ghosts only appeared when something was bothering them. Margarita's restaurant hadn't been open for too many years, and it was in an old building. Florence's ties to the place may have had nothing to do with the restaurant. She might have appeared now because something had happened. Her husband might be getting remarried, so she was reliving being left behind when he went on a business trip. Still, I was pretty sure she'd eaten an entire meal—a real one that Josie had placed in front of her. When she left, there had still been empty plates on the bar. At least, I thought so. I

could picture it in my head—or was that an image from so many meals eaten there? My mind wasn't playing tricks on me, was it?

I tried running an Internet search for Florence Marz and got one article from a small town in the next county. She was listed as one of the parents when her daughter was valedictorian. That was a couple of years earlier, so it wasn't proof that she was still alive, but I didn't find an obituary. A death might go unmentioned in a big city where only notable people got real obituaries and everyone else had to pay for a notice, but in a small town there would probably be a mention about the funeral and visitation. My guess was that she had been alive at least up to the point when that town's last newspaper issue had gone to press.

I shivered at the thought that even if I'd really seen her at the restaurant, she could have died Thursday night.

"What is it?" Jean asked after drifting through the wall and arranging herself in my guest chair. "You look bothered."

"Just proved myself right about something. Do you know anything about the Marz family?"

"They're all over the place. Old German stock, which you find a lot of in this part of the world."

"So not part of the sideshow?" A good portion of the town's population was descended from a sideshow that had been stranded in the town during the Depression, and a lot of those people had uncanny abilities they used in their acts and then passed on to their descendants. I'd found that many of the crimes in Stirling Mills involved those talents.

"They predate the sideshow, but there's no telling who might have married into the family. Did you get a good lead?"

"Just looking into that woman who didn't show up for the interview. No one else seems to have seen her, so I was making sure she was a real person and that she was alive. You haven't run across a Florence Marz in the afterlife, have you?"

"I don't chat that much with other dead people. The living are a lot more interesting. You think someone did away with this

woman?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m just bored and looking for something to investigate. Her maiden name was Rogers, and she said her parents were from here. Does that name ring a bell?”

“That’s another family who’s all over the place. No particular person stands out to me. You really think there’s something to this?”

“It sounds crazy, but I feel like something has to be going on here.”

“You’ve got good instincts, kiddo. There’s no shame in listening to them.”

She floated back through the wall, and I allowed myself a little smile. Jean was a demanding boss. That small amount of praise was as good as getting an award.

So, if I needed to follow my instincts, what did I need to do? I’d proved that a Florrie Marz existed, and the information I’d found matched what she’d told me. That meant I hadn’t imagined a conversation at the Mexican restaurant. There was no way I’d have dreamed up those details on my own. It didn’t seem as though she was dead, unless she’d died very recently, so that was the next thing I needed to prove, that she’d been alive when I’d talked to her.

I grinned when I realized I had an easy way to do that. Margarita may not have had cameras in the restaurant, but Jordan had put security cameras on all the buildings he owned in the downtown area. Wes had remarked on the lack of parking, which meant that unless Florrie had been very lucky, she would have had to walk down Main Street to reach the restaurant. Jordan probably had video of Florrie coming and going.

I should have thought of this earlier. It would be easy to prove she existed.

Chapter Four

Jordan lived in an apartment over the coffee shop he owned, right across the street from Margarita's, while his new mansion was being built on the edge of town. His office was in the same building, and he was such a workaholic that he was probably at his office on a Saturday afternoon. I wouldn't be surprised to find that he spent the day watching his downtown security cameras for signs of tourists. That was probably how he'd caught me heading to Margarita's on Thursday night. Jordan was seriously invested—literally—in the future of the town.

As I expected, I found him in his office, and while he wasn't sitting in front of the bank of security monitors I'd envisioned, he did have a large monitor on one side of his L-shaped desk showing the input from all the cameras in a grid. "Hey, Lexie," he greeted me. "Any interviews? I think I saw a couple of strangers on Main Street awhile ago."

I took a seat in his plush, modern guest chair, which promptly threatened to swallow me as I sank into its cushions. I might need a winch to get out. Not that I'd want to for awhile. It was really comfortable. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I did meet someone who's visiting town, and she called it a vacation, though she's house-sitting, so she couldn't talk about accommodations."

He sat up straight, suddenly alert. "Really? Someone's vacationing here?" If he was surprised, that ruled out the theory that he'd kidnapped her to show her the sights. Not that I'd been

serious about that, but it was good to be able to definitively rule out yet another theory.

“Yeah, and she agreed to an interview. She was excited about it. But then she didn’t show up, and she hasn’t been answering her phone.”

His delight quickly turned to alarm. “She’s missing? Have you called the police? We need to make sure she’s okay. Something happening to a tourist would be terrible for the town’s reputation.”

“And for the tourist.”

“Well, yes, of course. Making sure she’s okay is the first priority.”

“I don’t think anyone grabbed her off the street, if that’s what you’re worried about. And, yes, I did check with the police to make sure there hadn’t been any wrecks, or anything like that. Something else could have happened, though. She mentioned that the place where she’s house-sitting has a pool, and I’m worried about someone swimming alone, without anyone there to notice if she’s in distress.”

I could practically see the relief flooding through his body at the idea that the town might not have a lurking strangler preying upon visitors. “Oh, yes, that would be bad,” he said, though he sounded elated.

“I don’t know who she’s house-sitting for, so I can’t check on her,” I continued, building up to my pitch. “I was wondering if maybe you got her on one of your cameras when she was entering or leaving Margarita’s. If I could get a picture of her, someone might recognize her, and I might be able to track down who her friend is or where she’s staying.” Jordan wasn’t in on the secret about me seeing ghosts, so I couldn’t tell him why I really wanted to see the video. I hoped my alternative explanation worked.

It must have, for he swiveled in his chair to face the monitor with the security feeds. “Sure. Do you know when she went to Margarita’s?”

“Thursday night.”

He tapped out something on a keyboard, then asked, "What time?"

"I think she arrived around six and left at maybe half-past eight."

He tapped something else, and one of the grid squares blew up to fill the screen. It showed the front door of Margarita's. People moved in and out in double time, looking like they were in an old silent movie. I reluctantly forced myself out of the embrace of the comfortable chair and moved to lean over his shoulder to watch. I saw myself approach and enter the restaurant. "It must be coming up," I said. "She got there not long after I did." He slowed the speed, and I held my breath as I watched the time stamp on the screen move. It was just about time. She should be there at any moment.

And, of course, that was when a truck drove between the camera and the restaurant, blocking the view. It even stopped right there, filling almost the entire frame, as a car backed out of a parking space in front of it. We watched awhile longer after the truck left, until I was absolutely certain it was past the time when she'd arrived. "That was terrible timing," I said.

"We can catch her leaving," he said, speeding up the video so that it went by in a blur before he slowed it down again.

I saw Cissy enter and said, "This is almost it. She left soon after this woman got there."

He slowed the video to normal speed. I actually groaned out loud when a truck pulling a camper trailer entered the frame, blocking the view again. "What are the odds?" I asked.

"Actually, pretty good," he said. "A lot of trucks, trailers, campers, and the like come down this road. I have the camera set to watch the approach to my building, so it's not a problem for me. I'm not trying to spy on Margarita. Maybe she's got cameras."

I shook my head, "No. She only turns them on after hours to catch anyone who breaks in. She doesn't like spying on her customers."

"I ought to talk to her about that. They could come in handy for liability issues. Like, if someone tries to say they found something in their food, she could have proof that they put it in there themselves."

"Does that happen often?"

"You'd be surprised. That's why I have cameras in the coffee shop."

"Do you have any other angles that might have caught her? The place was really crowded, so the parking nearby was full. She might have had to walk."

He scrolled through the feeds from a couple of other cameras, but I didn't see anyone who resembled Florrie. "That's all I've got," he said. One nice thing about him not knowing about my talent with ghosts was that it didn't seem to have crossed his mind that I might have been talking to someone who was never there.

"Thanks, anyway," I said.

"I hope you find her. Someone who considers house-sitting in Stirling Mills to be a vacation would make for a great interview. Of course, we want to encourage people to stay in the motel or in one of our historic bed and breakfasts instead of house-sitting, but if she's having fun here, maybe that'll encourage more tourism." He beamed. "Maybe that's it, she's having too much fun to stop for an interview and you'll hear from her next week after her vacation."

"Yeah, maybe that's it." His enthusiasm for the town really was rather endearing. He was doing his best to make it a place where young people could stay and still have jobs. A lot of towns in this area had practically died out so that all that was left were empty storefronts, a few houses, and a church with a dozen members, most of them over eighty.

"You're not going to run an article about this, are you? I mean the disappearance. I hope if you do get a chance to talk to her you will write something about her choosing Stirling Mills as a vacation spot."

"I don't yet know if there's anything to write about. Wes says

this doesn't count as a missing person case yet. If she's been declared officially missing and hasn't been found by the time we go to press, I suppose I'll have to run something, so people will know to look out for her."

"Of course. But let's hope it doesn't come to that. Keep me posted."

"I'll let you know if I hear anything." I turned to leave.

He called after me, "Look for those tourists on Main Street. It was a couple, and I think they were headed for the Gallery on Main."

"I'll look for them," I promised. Downstairs and out on the sidewalk, I glanced around. The potential tourist couple was nowhere in sight, and I did look up and down the street, so I'd fulfilled my promise. With a clear conscience, I headed back to my office. I thought about checking with Ruthie, the artist whose studio was across the street. She was frequently painting by the window and saw most of what happened on Main Street. But since I didn't think I could give Ruthie a good description of Florrie, I wasn't sure it would do much good. I thought I'd recognize her, but I still couldn't describe her adequately.

I was starting to wonder if maybe Florrie really had been a ghost. Maybe she'd recently died and it was like that movie with the ghost who didn't know he was a ghost. That was why she seemed to eat and why she got up to leave instead of just vanishing. She'd made an appointment with me because she thought she really could keep it, and maybe her phone account hadn't yet been cancelled, so her voice mail was still open, but no one was returning the calls.

If that was the case, I felt sorry for her. Imagine, spending the afterlife stuck thinking she was in Stirling Mills and that was a vacation. I liked the place, and I'd probably rather spend a vacation in Stirling Mills than in Vegas, but I had no intention of spending eternity here. I doubted there was room for more than one ghostly editor at the newspaper.

Speaking of whom, Jean was at my desk when I opened the front door. “Did you find your missing woman yet?” she asked.

“I don’t know if she’s missing because I don’t know if she was really there,” I said, taking a seat in the side chair, which wasn’t nearly as comfortable as the one in Jordan’s office. “I tried getting video of her coming or going, but there was always something in the way at the key time.”

“Or you think there was. There may have been nothing for the video to show.”

“Now you think I saw a ghost, too?”

“Just considering possibilities. If you can’t find evidence one way, it could mean the other thing.”

“So, treat this as though she really is a ghost and see what happens?”

“If she showed up to talk to you, it’s probably for a reason. She needs something to be able to move on.”

“Okay, then, what do I do? How do I talk to her?”

“Try what you did when you talked to her before. Or you could try a séance.”

“For real? How do I even do that?”

“I don’t know, but I bet Lupe could give you some ideas.” Lupe was Margarita’s grandmother, and Lupe’s grandmother had been the fortune-teller in the sideshow. I thought she was more of a crystal gazer than a medium, but it was possible that she knew what went into summoning spirits. I still wasn’t entirely sure whether that was a real gift or just a bit of stagecraft. In this town, you could never be too sure.

That meant another night eating at Margarita’s. Mexican food three nights in a row was probably bad for me, but this was work-related. Besides, I’d been eating some of the lighter menu items, with no enchiladas swimming in cheese, so I could indulge one more time. On a Saturday night, I’d need to go later, since the place would be busy during prime dining hours, and this was the sort of activity best reserved for after the guests were gone. Lupe, a

classical guitarist, often played in the restaurant on weekends, so she'd probably be there. It was perfect.

In the meantime, I tried researching how to contact ghosts, but it wasn't an easy topic to research online. I couldn't tell how valid any of the information was, since I couldn't verify the credentials of the people presenting the information. I knew that ghosts were real and that some people could see and hear them, so I knew that people talking about ghosts weren't necessarily kooks, but I also knew that there were a lot of charlatans out there. The trick was telling the difference.

I'd never had trouble summoning a ghost. My problem was getting them to go away. If they had something to say, they made sure I heard it. When I wanted to talk to a ghost, I went to where I thought one might be and waited. Or I shouted, "Jean!" and she showed up, then griped about how she didn't answer to me. I hoped that all I'd have to do to talk to Florrie, if she was a ghost, was sit on a barstool and call out to her.

This town had earlier hours than Dallas, so unless there was another big party, things would be winding down in the restaurant starting around eight. I headed over there then and, much to my relief, there were no big parties, just the usual crowd, which was already thinning. It was quiet enough that Lupe's music was clearly audible as she sat in a corner and played her guitar.

"Any luck with your interview?" Margarita asked me when I took my usual seat.

"Nope. Still haven't heard from her. But I did find that she actually exists. So I didn't imagine her."

"I never said you did."

"I didn't definitively prove that she's alive, either. There was no obituary that I could find, but she could have died within the past week."

"Or, if her husband's the kind of cheapskate who wouldn't take his wife with him to Vegas so that she had to house-sit as a vacation, he might not have had an obituary put in the paper."

“Maybe, but I don’t charge for obits. I don’t know about other papers around here, but we at least publish the death notices. Families may splurge on something bigger, but her name would be in the paper, regardless, and she’s from another small town. Still, I have nothing proving that she was alive when I talked to her. I even had Jordan check his security footage from the coffee shop, and would you believe, trucks or trailers drove past right around the time she’d have been coming and going.”

“Jordan has cameras on my entrance?” she asked, frowning.

“The camera is set to get the approach to his coffee shop, but your door is in the frame. Unless someone’s driving by.”

“Huh. I guess he’s more paranoid than I am.”

“He’s worth a lot more, which makes him a bigger target.”

“True, alas.”

Lupe finished her set and came to sit by me, in the same seat where Florrie had sat Thursday night. Margarita put a glass of iced tea in front of her grandmother as she said, “Do you think maybe she was a ghost?”

“Who’s a ghost?” Lupe asked after taking a sip of her tea.

I filled her in about the mysterious woman I’d spoken to that no one else had seen. “Right now, I don’t have any proof that she was alive, but I can’t find any record of her being dead.”

“Have you tried contacting her again—and not using the phone, if you know what I mean.”

“I was thinking about trying that tonight, maybe after closing,” I said, adding to Margarita, “If you don’t mind.”

“You mean, like a séance?” Margarita asked.

“I don’t know if we have to get that fancy,” I said. “Usually to talk to ghosts, I just call out to them.”

“What ghosts are you trying to talk to now?” Wes asked, taking the seat to my other side.

I tried not to groan out loud. I didn’t want him watching this, and I’d forgotten that this was when he usually came to the restaurant, when it was less crowded. “That lady I was supposed to

interview.”

“You decided she was a ghost, after all?”

“More like I’m trying to rule that out. I verified that she’s real, but can’t confirm whether she’s currently dead or alive. I figure if I see her again and am sure she’s a ghost, then I’ll know. If not, then I guess I’ll figure something else out.”

“If you’re going to do a séance, you’ll need some things,” Lupe said. She finished her drink and said to Margarita, “You don’t need me to do another set, do you?”

“No, the night’s winding down.”

Lupe stepped down from the stool. “I’ll be back in a bit. Don’t start without me.” She picked up her guitar case and left.

“A séance?” Wes asked, his eyes wide.

“Probably not,” I said. “I’m just going to try to talk to her again. I haven’t had to do anything special before to talk to a ghost. My whole life seems to be a séance.”

In the meantime, I needed dinner. After Wes and I ordered, he said, “This thing has really gotten under your skin, huh?”

“It’s a mystery, and you know how I get about things that don’t add up.”

“You dig at them until you find something. Or you make up your own story to fill in the blanks. At least this doesn’t have anything to do with any case I’m working on.”

“Yet. What if I learn that something did happen to her?”

“Then I’ll look into it.” He added with a grin, “And then it will be my case and I’ll want you to stay out of it.”

“And you’ll just have to be disappointed,” I said with a grin of my own.

After finishing my meal, I ate far too many tortilla chips while I waited for the last of the customers to leave. I was starting to feel like that couple in the corner booth was hanging around on purpose. They’d already paid their bill, so now they were just loitering. Margarita had released the wait staff and the cooks, so the only employees left in the restaurant were the dishwashers,

who were waiting for the couple's glasses to run a final load. It was getting harder and harder to resist the urge to go over and tell that couple that surely they had something better to do when they finally got up and left. Margarita rushed to turn off the "open" sign, and Lupe slipped in before she locked the front door. "I think I have everything we'll need," she said, raising a large tote bag with a beach resort logo on it.

"Let's start by doing this the easy way," I said. "I've never needed candles and chanting to talk to a ghost before."

"Hang on a sec," Margarita said as she cleared off that last table. "I need to get this wrapped up." She rushed off to the kitchen with the dirty dishes, then came back, wiping her hands on a towel. "Okay, they should be done and out of here before anything truly weird starts happening. I don't want to freak out my staff. I've got good people, and I don't want to risk losing them."

"I guess me sitting here and seeming to talk to myself isn't too weird," I said. I'd have preferred not to do this around Wes, but he showed no sign of leaving. He'd seen me talk to a ghost before, but it was still something I felt self-conscious about.

"They won't notice," Margarita said. "If they even see what's going on out here, they'll think you're talking to us."

"Okay, then," I said, bracing myself. I wiped my sweaty palms on the thighs of my jeans and faced the empty stool where Florrie had sat the other evening. "Florrie, are you here?" I said. "We talked the other night, and I wanted to hear some more about your vacation."

I held my breath, waiting, but nothing happened. Part of me didn't actually expect anything to, since I still thought she'd been there and alive, but I tried to keep an open mind.

"Florrie?" I asked again. "It's Lexie. We spoke before." Ghosts usually appeared when they were angry about something, so I said, "Your husband went on a business trip to Vegas and didn't want you to go, so you ended up coming here. Do you want to talk about that? Surely you were angry."

Nothing.

“Maybe she wasn’t a ghost,” I said with a shrug.

Lupe began pulling things out of her bag. “Not so fast.”

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Chapter Five

“Do we really need to do an actual séance?” I asked as an uneasy feeling formed in the pit of my stomach. I was getting used to talking to ghosts, and I even tried to do it on purpose every so often because they could be good sources of information, but doing it as some sort of ritual seemed weird. “I thought most of the people who did séances were charlatans, anyway.”

“You know you can talk to ghosts, so you’re not a charlatan,” Lupe said. She arranged candles on top of the bar and lit them. “This is merely creating an ideal environment for ghosts to appear. Now, where was it that your ghost last manifested?”

“She was sitting on that stool,” I said, pointing. I resisted the urge to say that Florrie really had been sitting there and wasn’t a ghost because I knew Lupe would tell me that my bad attitude would hamper the success of this operation.

She moved the candles close to that stool and draped a shawl over it, then set a crystal ball on the seat. “Now I need someone to make a salt circle around that seat.”

“Why?” I asked.

“If anything manifests, we don’t want it getting away. Since you don’t have anything physical belonging to her, this is going to be a more general summoning, and we have no idea what will show up.”

Even though I lived and worked with a ghost I spent most of my days with, the idea of something showing up that was so scary

that we'd need to keep it within a barrier gave me chills. And then I wondered if I could use the salt trick to keep Jean out when I wanted privacy. Probably not if I wanted things to remain happy within the newspaper office, I decided.

"I needed to freshen up the salt shakers, anyway," Margarita said as she unscrewed the top of the one on the bar. She poured a circle around the barstool, and I scooted my seat back a few inches. I wanted to be well on the outside of that circle.

Lupe inspected Margarita's work, then stood, frowning, as she stared at the setup. "It would really help if we had something to draw her. What meal did she seem to be eating?"

"She had the street tacos" I said.

"I could throw one together," Margarita said. "I set some of the ingredients aside to make a snack." She started to head to the kitchen, but paused, looking back. "She must have died pretty recently because I didn't add those to the menu until late last year."

Or she hadn't been dead at all, I thought, then tried to purge the thought. Negativity might ruin things, even if I was still pretty sure the woman I'd had dinner with had been alive.

Margarita returned a moment later with a taco on a small plate, which she set on the seat of the stool, next to the crystal ball. "Good," Lupe said with an approving nod. "That smells enticing enough to summon someone. Now, let's arrange ourselves around the seat. This is going to be awkward working around the bar. Margarita, you go behind the bar. Wes here behind the seat, and I'll take this spot." She moved to the other side of the stool. "Everyone, hold hands."

This arrangement meant I'd be holding hands with Wes. I wished I'd had a chance to wash my hands, and I was afraid they might still be greasy from eating chips. I wiped my hand on my pants leg as surreptitiously as I could before I took his hand. It was warm and strong, and my hand almost disappeared into his grasp. I couldn't recall if we'd ever even shaken hands before. When we

met, I'd just found a body and he'd treated me as a suspect, so I didn't think there had been any handshakes.

I was so distracted by the rare physical contact with Wes that I forgot I also had to reach over the bar to hold hands with Margarita. "We must complete the circle," Lupe said, and I hurried to grab Margarita's hand. Once the circle was complete, I looked expectantly at Lupe, waiting for her to start the séance.

"You're the one who communicates with spirits," she said. "Call them."

"But how? I don't know how this works. Is there some sort of ritual?"

"The ritual doesn't matter. It's only for show. We've done some things that may amplify your call and focus the energy, but you're the one who can communicate with spirits."

Feeling really foolish and self-conscious, I gazed at the ceiling and said, "Florence, are you there? We've got a taco for you, and I'd like to talk to you. You seemed to have something left unfinished, and I can help you with that."

Nothing happened.

"Broaden your appeal," Lupe said. "If she can't appear, maybe she's communicated with someone else who can pass on her message."

"Okay," I said, feeling even sillier. "Are there any spirits who want to communicate with us?" The only reason this activity was even remotely tolerable was that I knew I could talk to ghosts, so I knew we weren't about to do any kind of silly table-rapping exercise, and if Lupe brought out a Ouija board, I was out of there.

The air over the seat shimmered, and I gasped. "Something's here," I whispered. "Can anyone else see it?"

"Sorry, no," Wes said. "What do you see?"

"It's just starting to take shape. Something kind of like an old-timey gangster, maybe?" The spirit wore a wide-shouldered suit and a rakishly tilted hat. Addressing the spirit, I said, "Hello, who are you?"

"I gotta delivery, toots. You want it in back?"

"Have you talked to someone named Florence?"

"Not unless that's your name. Now, we've got to get this stuff unloaded before the cops get here. Jean warned us that they might know something's up, so let's get going."

"Okay, you go do that," I said, and he vanished. To Margarita, I said, "I think this place must have been a speakeasy during Prohibition. Or they sold illegal booze here. And I think Jean was in on it."

"I've heard rumors," Margarita said.

"You've got a bootlegger ghost, but I hadn't seen him before, so maybe he's not a regular. Let's just hope this little exercise doesn't bring him back for good. And I need to talk to Jean. It might be fun to do an article about that period of history, but then I can't exactly use a ghost as a source. Maybe I could say I found some archives she left behind. Anyway, I guess this didn't work."

"Try again," Lupe urged.

I didn't want to go through this again, but then it had worked, bringing up a ghost I'd never seen before. Maybe it was worth another shot. "Is there anyone there who knows Florence?" I asked.

I saw another shimmer forming. This one looked like she was from around the turn of the century—the previous one. A young woman who looked like a slightly sluttier version of a Gibson Girl sat perched on the edge of the stool, leaning against the bar. Her big, elaborate hairdo had loose tendrils falling from it, like she'd been active and hadn't touched up her hair. She wore an off-the-shoulder gown that displayed a substantial amount of skin and cleavage, though I thought the cleavage was probably assisted by a corset. She wasn't quite the saloon girl from old Westerns, but she might have been the town's equivalent from around 1900. "Florence?" I asked tentatively.

"She's here?" Margarita asked in a whisper, but her grandmother quickly shushed her.

"Here in the flesh," the ghost said in a seductive purr.

“I think we have a case of mistaken identity,” I said. “You don’t know another Florence, do you?”

“Not who works here. I’m the one and only, and it’s going to stay that way.”

“I’m sorry, I was looking for someone else. You can go,” I said. I glanced away so that I wasn’t looking at her, and when I looked back, she was gone.

“Who was it?” Margarita asked.

“Not the Florence I was looking for. This place used to be a saloon, I think, complete with saloon girls,” I said.

“Saloon girls?” Wes asked, sounding far too interested for my comfort.

“At least one. And she’s way too old for you. And dead,” I said. “But I thought you couldn’t sell alcohol in this town.”

“This place was built as a saloon,” Margarita said. “The bar is original. The liquor laws didn’t change until the fifties, well, aside from during Prohibition. It’s like a lot of things that people think of as the way things always were. The ‘good old days’ are just the fifties, when they passed a lot of laws to make things be like the good old days that never existed.”

“They got a new pastor in town, and he rallied everyone to change the laws,” Lupe said. “I was little then, but I remember all the shouting in church. Not every pastor in town agreed with him, but he thought Catholics were evil, anyway.”

“I’ve heard people talking about white robes being involved,” Margarita said. “If you know what I mean. I think they tried to run this place as a restaurant after the law changed, but then it went under and the building was just used for storage until I bought the place. Imagine, your business being ruined because someone came to town and declared that you were evil.”

“If you start that campaign to get the liquor laws changed, that would definitely be a story I’d do,” I said. “If you can tie the passing of the liquor laws to something that’s currently unsavory, then the opponents of change might lose some moral high ground.

I wonder if there are any good sources who could provide more than rumor—that are still alive, I mean. I don't think I can get away with using Jean's 'archive' too many times." I released Margarita's hand—Wes was holding mine tight and I didn't yet want to yank my hand out of his—and said, "I got a couple of good story ideas, so this wasn't a total waste, but it didn't work for the main thing we wanted."

"Give it one more shot," Lupe urged.

"I don't know . . ." I hedged.

"Go on," Margarita said. "I'm curious to learn who's living in my restaurant."

"Might as well try," Wes said with a shrug.

"Okay then," I said, taking Margarita's hand once more. "Is there anyone else out there who can talk to me? Florence Marz, are you there? Do you need help?"

Nothing happened for a long moment. Then it suddenly got cold. "Did your air just kick on?" Wes asked. "I must be standing under a vent."

"Hush," Lupe chided.

A rush of wind blew through the restaurant, and I instinctively ducked. When I straightened and looked at the barstool, there was something there. Every other ghost I'd seen had looked like a person—wispy and insubstantial, but recognizably human, and I could even tell what they were wearing. It wasn't even about how long they were dead, since my childhood imaginary friend when my dad was stationed in England had been what I'm pretty sure was a medieval pikeman. But this ghost looked like the kind of thing that would be in the amusement attraction kind of haunted house, the sort of ghost played by a person wearing a sheet thrown over their head, only it didn't have any eye holes cut in the sheet, just a big, gaping maw of a mouth.

It strained against the invisible barrier that rose from the salt circle on the floor. That now didn't seem like overkill. Whatever this was, it was no longer human in any way, and it was angry.

Really, really angry. The wind blew out one of the candles, and the overhead lights flickered.

“What is that?” Wes asked.

“You see it?” I asked.

“A ghost right out of a movie?” Margarita said. “Yeah, I see it. Is that what you see all the time?” I felt her shudder through our clasped hands.

“No, I see wispy people,” I said. “I don’t know what this is. How do we make it go away?” Ghosts normally didn’t bother me too much, but this was truly unsettling.

“Tell it to go,” Lupe said. “Then everyone release your hands. Don’t break the salt circle, whatever you do.”

“Get out of here!” I shouted at the ghost. “I wasn’t talking to you. Go!”

“Three, two, one, let go!” Lupe cried out, and we released each other’s hands. It might have been my imagination or wishful thinking, but I thought Wes had been a little slow and reluctant to release my hand. Lupe blew out the remaining candles, and the thing over the barstool vanished with a final gust of wind. When it was gone, Lupe reached over and grabbed her crystal ball, tucking it away in a velvet pouch. “Well, now, that was interesting,” she said.

“That thing is living in my restaurant?” Margarita asked, her voice shaking.

“It took some effort to bring it here, so I don’t think it’s here all the time,” her grandmother said reassuringly. “Even so, I’ll get a friend to come over in the morning and cleanse the place. Leave the salt until then.”

“I think it’s safe to say that either Florence really doesn’t want to talk, or she isn’t dead,” I said. Or she’d been alive when I’d talked to her and had died since then but wasn’t haunting this place, but I didn’t want to consider that yet. I was gratified that none of them brought up the possibility that I’d imagined her to begin with. Yes, I’d had imaginary friends at various points in my

life, but I was fairly certain they'd all been ghosts, and even then I'd known they weren't real, living people.

"Then the question is, what happened to her?" Margarita said.

"My guess is she chickened out of the interview but didn't want to admit it to you," Wes said. "She may not be a ghost, but she ghosted you."

NO MATTER WHAT WES THOUGHT, I was still concerned. If Florrie had changed her mind about the interview, she could have texted me without talking to me. The fact that she hadn't, when she struck me as a conscientious person, made me feel that something must have happened to her. Since the séance hadn't worked, I'd need to find another way to track her down, dead or alive. The first step would be to find any friends or family she had in town.

The next morning, I went down to the office with my tea and looked up that wedding announcement again. The wedding attendants would be a good place to start. I made a list of the bridesmaids and groomsmen. There were no other mentions of any of the bridesmaids in the newspaper archives, which meant either they were from out of town or they hadn't done anything else to get in the newspaper during the years that were digitized. The groomsmen were the groom's brothers, and I doubted she'd be house-sitting for her in-laws while her husband was in Vegas.

I headed to the newspaper morgue in a corner of the press room. That was also where we kept the archives of school yearbooks and other references that came in handy for researching the townspeople. I might be able to find out something about Hugo Marz that would help me learn about Florrie. Jean was back there, hovering near the scanner.

"Were you able to contact anyone?" she asked me when I entered the archive corner.

"Yeah, but not the person I wanted to talk to. Was Margarita's

place really a speakeasy during Prohibition?”

“That place down the block that was a saloon?”

“Yeah.”

She winked. “Let’s just say there were a few friendly gatherings held there. Unfortunately, Prohibition came back to this town. I never could get those laws changed, no matter how many strongly worded editorials I wrote.”

“Well, that may be a project for the next local election cycle,” I said. “The demographics have changed, and we’ve got Jordan to bankroll a campaign. But what does it mean that I wasn’t able to contact a ghost who was talking to me there earlier?”

“Most likely, it means she isn’t actually dead.”

“That’s what I thought. Which means I need to find out where she is. I’m going to start by tracking down anyone she or her husband might know around here.”

I’d just pulled a yearbook off the shelf when the scanner squawked and I heard the dispatcher say, “Anyone near the historic district? I got a call about an abandoned car on Avenue G and Cottonwood. Neighbors say it’s been parked there for several days, and the people whose house it’s parked by don’t know anything about it.” The radio chatter in Stirling Mills tended to be casual, without the codes and formality that came with larger departments.

Jean and I looked at each other. “You think . . .” she began.

Wes’s voice came over the radio. “I’m not too far away. I’ll stop by and check it out next time I go through there.”

I was already heading for the garage in back. An abandoned, unfamiliar car sounded like the sort of thing that might go with a woman who’d vanished, and I wanted to be there in case it did have something to do with Florrie.

I got to the address before there was any sign of a police car. It was on the edge of the historic district near downtown, where the houses were long and low mid-century ranch style rather than the Victorian and Arts and Crafts houses in the core of the district. A

car was parked on a side street, not directly in front of any house. It wasn't blocking a mailbox, driveway, or fire hydrant, so I didn't see what the problem was. I wouldn't have thought it was all that suspicious, but I didn't know what was customary. Not a lot of cars were parked on this street. Maybe it was one of those things that just wasn't done, an unwritten neighborhood rule. I parked behind the car and got out to investigate. The car itself wasn't too remarkable, an ordinary silver sedan, no bumper stickers or decals. I wasn't sure what I expected to find. Maybe a body in the driver's seat? There wasn't one. I did check.

While I was trying to peer through the windows without touching the car, a police SUV pulled up. "Really, Lex?" Wes said when he got out of the truck. "Must be a slow news day if an abandoned car brought you out on a Sunday."

"Summer is dreadfully slow," I said with an elaborately casual shrug.

He gave me a suspicious side-eye. "Did you think this had something to do with that woman who didn't show up for an interview?"

"Maybe," I hedged. "We did prove that she's probably not a ghost. It was worth checking out, anyway. There isn't a body inside, in case you were wondering."

"Unless it's in the trunk. But it would have to be really fresh for that not to be obvious in this heat."

I gulped. That hadn't even occurred to me. I felt like my curiosity about the missing woman—who might not actually be missing—had taken a dark turn. "Can you run a plate to see who it belongs to?" I asked.

"I will, eventually." He pulled an orange sticker off a pad and stuck it on the rear window. "This isn't technically a no-parking zone, and it hasn't been here long enough to be considered abandoned, but if it isn't moved in the next day or so, we'll have to do something about it." He bent and marked one of the tires with orange chalk.

“Isn’t parking enforcement beneath your pay grade?”

“I do a little of everything, whatever’s needed.” He gave a friendly wave, and I turned to see a woman standing on the front porch of the house on the opposite corner, watching us. She must have been the one who’d called it in. He jotted down the license number and headed back to his truck. I was dying to follow to see what he came up with when he ran the tags, but he didn’t invite me, and I suspected he’d tell me if it was nothing, just to tease me.

I tried to look patient, like I didn’t really care, but it’s hard to stand by the side of the road looking like nothing’s going on. If you’re standing by the side of the road, then it’s generally because there’s something happening, and few of those things are good.

When Wes emerged from his truck, he was frowning. “What did you say your no-show’s name was?”

“Florence Marz. Her husband’s name is Hugo, in case it’s registered in his name.”

“Well, this car belongs to her. Maybe you’re right that something’s happened.”

Chapter Six

I barely had enough self-control not to pump my fist in the air, shout, “Yes!” and do a victory dance right there on the side of the street. Instead, like the mature adult I was, I folded my arms across my chest and said, “Ha, told you. Are you going to search the car? There may be clues there.”

“I don’t have a good legal reason to do so,” Wes said with a shrug. “It’s not even illegally parked.”

“Even if it belongs to a missing person?”

“She hasn’t been reported missing.”

“I don’t count? Or did that not count as a formal report? I can do that if you need me to.”

“She hasn’t been reported missing by anyone who would expect to be in regular contact with her.”

“But everyone she would have regular contact with is out of town, so they may not even notice she’s missing until it’s way too late. Aren’t the first forty-eight hours supposed to be the most important? We’re already past that.”

“How would you like it if I just opened your car and looked around inside after you didn’t show up at Margarita’s for dinner one Thursday? Wouldn’t you feel violated?”

“If I’d been kidnapped and you found something that helped find and rescue me, I’d be grateful.”

“And what if you just weren’t feeling well, stayed in that evening, and left your car parked in front of your office? It’s not as

though you're obligated to inform anyone when you decide to change your routine. Wouldn't you consider it a violation if I took it upon myself to search your car?"

"Well, maybe . . . But you might be able to find information on where she's house-sitting and confirm that she's okay. That wouldn't have to hold up in court as a legal search since you're not investigating a crime."

"It's still a violation of her privacy."

I walked slowly around the car, looking for any scrap of evidence that might give him a reason to do something.

"Don't you dare open that car, Lex," he warned.

"You'd arrest me for trespass or auto theft, or whatever crime applies?"

"If you're dumb enough to do it in front of me, yeah."

"So, go away and you won't have to know."

He put his fists on his hips and took the kind of solid stance that would probably keep him upright if I charged into him, making it clear that he wasn't going anywhere. With a glare at him, I held my hands up so they were clearly not touching anything and kept searching. There was a light film of dust on the car, but it was otherwise fairly clean, like it had been washed not long before Florrie came to Stirling Mills. This wasn't going to be a case like on TV in which we found traces of mud unique to one particular location. Was that itself suspicious? If you were going to dump a body and then abandon that person's car, running it through a car wash first would be a good idea.

I was about to give up and admit defeat when I got to the driver's-side door and noticed something dark in contrast to the silver paint just under the door handle. "Wait a second, is that blood?"

"Seriously, or are you looking for an excuse to search?"

"Honest, there's something there, and I'm no expert, but it looks like blood to me."

"Don't touch it!" Wes ordered.

I stepped back, my hands up, as he moved over and bent to peer at it. "You know, it might be."

"Would that be a reason to search the car?"

"It is worth looking at." He went back to his truck and returned wearing gloves and carrying an evidence collection kit. The town was too small to have a real crime scene team or even actual detectives, so several of the more senior officers, like Wes, were trained in those functions. He took pictures of the door handle and collected samples before trying the car door. "Hmm, it's unlocked," he noted as he opened the door. "That's odd." He leaned inside and emerged a minute later, holding a cell phone. "This is all that's in there. It was under the passenger seat."

"I guess a printout of the directions to the place she's house-sitting would have been too much to ask," I said. "But this could explain why she hasn't responded to my calls." I got out my phone and called Florrie's number. The phone in Wes's hand rang. "Yep. That's why she's not answering. Don't tell me you don't find this at least a little suspicious. She sets an appointment with me, doesn't show, and then we find her car parked on the side of the road, with blood on the door handle and nothing inside but her phone. They must have wanted to make sure she couldn't be tracked."

"They?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "We don't know if a 'they' is involved."

"How many people do you know who'd willingly leave their phones inside an unlocked car?"

"Anyone who doesn't want to be reached. Maybe she got fed up with her husband drunk dialing her from Vegas."

"But with the door left unlocked?"

"She might have been absentminded when she shut the door, or had her hands full, or didn't realize that her key fob clicker didn't work. That's just one possibility. But I will look into it, trust me."

"And you want me to stay out of it."

"I want you to not interfere."

I thought that left me a lot of room to work. Doing research

wasn't interfering. It might even be helpful. The main thing I needed to find was who Florrie was house-sitting for. If I could find that, then we could verify whether she was lying blissfully by the pool while doing a digital detox or was truly missing. If there was nothing going on, then my guess was that the place she was staying was close to where the car was parked. I wasn't sure why she hadn't parked more directly in front of that house, since part of house-sitting was making it clear that the house was occupied. That was one reason why I still had the nagging sense that something was wrong.

Jean accosted me as soon as I returned to the office. "Was it hers?" she demanded.

"Yeah, it was." She followed me as I made my way through the print room to the archive corner.

"So you were right. You did talk to a living woman."

"I did." I should have felt a lot more vindicated than I did, I realized. I stopped and turned to face her. "But that doesn't explain why no one else saw her. True, the restaurant was really busy that night, and she wasn't all that memorable, but it's kind of weird that she didn't seem to have registered on anyone at all other than me. I know that cashier from the grocery store looked right at her, but she said she didn't see her."

"Didn't you say her parents were from here? It might be a sideshow talent."

"The sideshow had an invisible man?"

"Not literally invisible, just unnoticeable."

"What kind of show would that be? I wouldn't think that being utterly forgettable would be much of a talent."

"Not on its own, but there are places where it could come in handy. What about a magician's assistant who can help set up a trick without the audience remembering seeing him?"

"Oh, like stagehands wearing black so you don't see them making scene changes."

"Exactly. Someone like that could put a bird or a rabbit in a hat

on stage, and even though the audience is looking right at it, they don't remember seeing it."

"They actually did this?"

With a wink she said, "It's bad form to give away a magician's secrets, so I never bothered proving it. Besides, once they settled in town, the magician only did shows at local carnivals and fundraisers, and blowing his secrets would have ruined the fun for everyone. On the other hand, there were shadier things that could be done with that talent. Unfortunately, I couldn't prove that, either."

"I'm thinking that in a carnival, being able to go unnoticed would be good for pickpocketing the audience members during a show."

"And outside a carnival, it's great for shoplifting. But it was less effective once they'd been in town for a while. It doesn't seem to work as well once people know them. They're still not entirely memorable, but they're not essentially invisible once they become familiar."

I paused, considering. "I would think that if you didn't know you had an uncanny 'don't notice me' talent and weren't trying to slip past anyone, it might be disconcerting. You'd probably have a hard time getting service at bars or in restaurants, people would cut in front of you in line, and getting a job would be difficult because no one would remember your interview to hire you unless you looked great on paper and the other candidates left a negative impression. But if no one else remembered Florrie, why did I? Is it part of my seeing ghosts thing, like Wes not being able to read me?"

"You talked to her for some time and made an appointment with her, so you remembered her. A waitress who took dozens of orders that night might not remember her among all the other customers."

"Even having seen her, she's kind of a blur in my memory," I said. "I might be able to pick her out of a lineup if there were

pictures, but I couldn't direct a sketch artist to put together a drawing of her. Yeah, I think there's a good chance that she's descended from the magician's assistant in the sideshow. That's something else to look up." I resumed walking toward the archives, Joan floating alongside me.

"About that car they found," she said. "Any clues there?"

I'd almost forgotten the car after learning that being utterly forgettable was an actual uncanny talent. "Oh yeah, get this, there was blood on the door handle, and her phone was in the car."

"By phone, you mean one of those portable ones, not like on the desk?"

"Yes, the portable kind," I said, forcing myself not to roll my eyes. Considering that Jean had died before cell phones existed, she was doing pretty well at keeping up with modern times, so I could forgive her occasional confusion about how it all worked.

"What did your cop say?"

"Nothing, as usual. He wouldn't commit to the possibility that there might have been foul play. But he did collect evidence. And I'm going to do a little digging." I picked up the yearbook I'd been about to check when the news about the car came over the scanner and looked up Hugo Marz. He was in the index, so I took the book to my desk. Jean followed, passing through the wall while I went through the doorway. She hovered just behind me so she could look over my shoulder as I sat down and opened the book.

The first page listed in the index led to the senior portraits. Hugo had been a stocky boy who was basically square—physically. I didn't know about his personality, though he didn't look too exciting to me. He had a square head, broad shoulders, and no neck at all. He wore a mortarboard and graduation gown in the photo, so I couldn't see his hair. That meant it must have been pretty short. He looked like a buzz cut kind of guy. According to the year on this book, this was the thirtieth anniversary of his graduation, which meant there was likely a reunion. I'd run a number of stories about class reunions this summer and hadn't

paid much attention to them, but I made a mental note to check on this one, in case it had something to do with the situation. At the very least, Florrie might have run into the old friend she was housesitting for there.

The next index listing led to the football team photo, rows of boys on the stadium bleachers. Following the list of names under the photo, I found Hugo in the front row. His body was as square as his head, and he didn't seem to be particularly tall. I imagined he was the guy the other team had to get past if they wanted to score. He was basically a human roadblock. He wasn't featured in any of the action photos from games, so I got the impression he hadn't been a star.

I found another picture of Hugo on the prom spread with a girl who couldn't possibly have been Florrie. She was half a head taller than Hugo, so unless Hugo was really short for a football player, that ruled out Florrie, who couldn't have been any taller than I was. This girl was blond and had strong shoulders. I would have said she was a swimmer, but this town didn't have a swim team. She looked awfully familiar. "I think I know her," I muttered.

I was talking to myself, but Jean leaned so close, looking over my shoulder at the yearbook, that it sent a chill down my spine. "Who is it?"

There wasn't a caption with the photo identifying her, but there was one woman I'd run across lately who was tall and solid. "If I'm not mistaken, she's the cashier at the grocery store. I think her name's Cissy. She's the one who looked right at Florrie but told me she hadn't seen anyone, and when she showed up, that was when Florrie took off."

"Ah, and she's the old flame," Jean said. "Do you think there's hanky-panky going on?"

"I don't know, but I'm certain she saw Florrie and reacted to her. I get the feeling she was trying to gaslight me when she said she didn't see anyone."

"Which means she knows about Florrie's power—she was

hoping you'd forget her."

"Maybe. If Hugo and Florrie came to his reunion, they must have run into Cissy, so Cissy surely knew her. She had to be lying to me."

"She'd be my prime suspect."

Feeling like I was channeling Wes, I said, "For what? We don't know that there's any crime."

"Missing woman, abandoned car, and blood on the car door?" Jean asked, raising a thin eyebrow.

"Still, there's a big gap between not wanting to talk about her ex's wife and murdering the ex's wife. We don't even know if she really was an old flame. Maybe she was just a prom date. I didn't have a deep, long-term relationship with anyone I went to prom with. They were just dates." I looked through the Seniors section to get her last name—Clancy—and found her in the index. She was only in the prom photo and the Seniors section. That didn't tell me anything about her or her relationship with Hugo.

Turning to my computer, I looked up the class reunion articles from recent issues and found one for Hugo's class. There had been a reunion party at the Old Mill restaurant about a month earlier. I didn't find either Hugo's or Cissy's name mentioned among the organizers, and I didn't see them in the photo that ran with the article. The organizers had submitted their own photo, so I didn't have any unused pictures from the photographer I could check. I jotted down the names of people who were mentioned in the article, in case I needed to interview someone who'd been there.

I looked up Cissy to find an address and phone number. I didn't yet know the town well enough to recognize all the street names, so I had to search that address on an online map. "Whoa!" I said, leaning back in my seat, when I saw where the little flag appeared on the map.

"What is it?" Jean asked.

I pointed to the flag where Cissy's house was. "This is Cissy's address." I dragged my finger around the corner and across the

street. “This is where Florrie’s car was left.”

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Chapter Seven

“**A**ha!” Jean said. “The plot thickens. The girlfriend got the competition out of the way. She must have seen the wife at the restaurant and gone after her.”

“Or the wife saw the girlfriend, followed her, and the girlfriend caught her,” I said. Having a ghost around to bounce ideas off of took musing aloud to a whole new level. “It makes me wonder if the husband actually went to Vegas. Florrie said he didn’t want her coming along on the trip. Either he was planning to get up to something on the trip and thought she’d cramp his style, or he wasn’t actually going to Vegas. The business trip might have been a cover for spending a few days with his old girlfriend.”

“And the wife got wise to it and they did away with her.”

“Maybe.” I absently twirled my pen between my fingers as I thought. “But they’d have had to be pretty dumb to leave her car that near the girlfriend’s house when they abandoned it.” I looked at the map again. “Unless she parked around the corner to go spy on them, and they didn’t realize her car was there when they caught her.” I picked up my phone and pulled up my contacts.

“You’re not calling the cops, are you?”

“There’s not a lot I can do about this, and if I clue Wes in, I can make his job easier.”

But apparently he didn’t feel the same way. “I told you to stay out of it, Lex,” he said when he answered.

“How do you know why I was calling you?”

"I've met you."

"Yeah, well, what if I was calling to ask you to dinner?"

"Were you?" Did he sound eager? Excited? Or maybe worried.

"Well, no," I admitted, wondering if this had been my opening to ask him out. "But I was doing some research—which doesn't count as getting into it since reading isn't interfering with anything—and I found something that might be relevant. I thought I'd do you a favor and share it with you so you don't have to reinvent the wheel. Florrie's husband's thirty-year class reunion was last month here in Stirling Mills. His prom date was Cissy Clancy, and she lives just around the corner from where Florrie's car is."

"And?"

"Oh, come on, you don't think there might have been conflict between the wife and the high school girlfriend he may have reconnected with?"

"You've been watching too many of those woman-in-jeopardy TV movies. You don't know that Cissy was anything more than a prom date or that they reconnected at the reunion. Do you even know if Marz went to the reunion?"

"No," I said reluctantly. Maybe I should have done more research before calling him.

"Okay then." He sounded like he thought he'd won the argument. More gently, he added, "I'll keep this in mind. It may help if I need to explore that avenue. Thank you for sharing it with me. But don't get any more involved than that."

"You aren't the least bit concerned that Florrie might be tied up in Cissy's garage or buried in her garden?"

"Not at all."

"We don't even know for sure that Florrie's husband actually went to Vegas. What if he's here in town with Cissy?"

"You really are making up stories now. Have you considered writing a book or a screenplay instead of journalism as a career? You've got the imagination for it."

"I know Cissy saw Florrie at Margarita's the other night, and

then she lied to me about not seeing her. That wasn't my imagination. Her lie was part of why I started doubting whether the person I'd talked to was alive. She was gaslighting me, and innocent people who have nothing to hide have no reason to gaslight someone."

"Again, you don't even know for certain that Cissy ever met Florrie or has any idea who she is. This is all in your imagination. Florrie hasn't even been reported missing. We know she doesn't have her phone with her, wherever she is, so surely someone would have noticed by now that she's not answering her phone."

"They'd probably have reported her missing to the police in her town. Have you checked there?"

"Gee, that never occurred to me," he said, the sarcasm coming through loud and clear. I took that to mean that he had checked, and that warmed my heart ever so slightly. He might not be conducting an official investigation, but he was taking me somewhat seriously.

"She hasn't been reported missing, even at home?"

"Nope."

"That abandoned car doesn't have you worried?"

"She's probably doing exactly what she told you she was doing. She's hanging out by the pool at her friend's house, having warned her family that she's disconnecting, and doing the healthy thing by spending a few days without social media. They may have the landline number where she's staying and have been in touch with her that way."

That hadn't occurred to me, since I hadn't had a landline other than at the office for years. The newspaper phone had an extension in my apartment, but I never used it for personal calls. "What about her not showing up for the interview?"

"It may have totally slipped her mind, since she didn't have her phone with her to give a calendar reminder. By that time, she was relaxed and enjoying herself and not thinking about your conversation the night before. Let the lady have her time off. And

no digging around at Cissy's house. I will cite you for trespassing if anyone calls to report a prowler."

Every fiber of my being longed to tell him that he'd be sorry when I turned out to be right and he'd had the opportunity to save Florrie, but I resisted the urge. I didn't think he'd take it well, and it would be embarrassing if I turned out to be wrong.

When I hung up, Jean perched on the corner of my desk and said, "I take it he's not pursuing it."

"He thinks I'm letting my imagination run away with me." Though I had to admit that he had a point. A busy wife and mother who was also a teacher on her summer holiday had a chance to take some time to herself while her husband was away. Leaving her phone in her car would be a great way to unplug and relax and not have to see what other people were posting online about their fabulous vacations. She might even have been punishing or testing her husband by staying out of touch with him, trying to see if he would worry if he couldn't reach her.

"You're going to let it go?"

"Of course not. I want to be sure she's okay. Maybe the place she's house-sitting is nearby, and that's why her car is parked there." Turning to my computer, I switched the map to satellite view so I could see which houses had swimming pools. There weren't that many, which helped narrow it down. I still thought it was odd that she wasn't parked in front of the place she was house-sitting. Maybe the driveway was being resurfaced or there was work being done on that street. That was something I'd have to check out in person.

Meanwhile, I could investigate Cissy without trespassing. I needed to find out the extent of her relationship with Hugo and whether they'd reconnected at the reunion. For that, Margarita would be a good place to start. She knew a lot of people in town, so if she didn't know directly, she'd know who to ask. It looked like I'd be having Mexican food yet again tonight.

I WAITED until about seven to go to dinner, since on Sunday nights the big crowds tended to come before Sunday-evening church services and Margarita closed early. I had a better chance of talking to her when she wasn't too busy.

"Have you heard the latest?" I asked her as I took my usual seat at the bar.

"The latest about what?" she asked.

"The possibly missing woman who is not a ghost—at least, she wasn't a ghost when I talked to her. They found her car parked not too far from here. It was reported as an unknown car that may have been abandoned, since it hadn't moved in days and didn't belong to anyone who lived nearby."

"Do you feel vindicated?" she asked.

"Sort of. But she's still nowhere to be found. Her phone was in the car, so that explains why she didn't return my calls. And the car wasn't parked in front of a house. It was on a side street, near where an alley lets out." I leaned closer and lowered my voice. "And it's close to where her husband's prom date lives."

She was a lot more excited about that than Wes had been. Her eyes went wide, and she grinned like she'd just heard some juicy gossip. "You think he got back together with his prom date?"

"I don't know. All I know is that there was a picture of them in the yearbook. I don't know if they were actually an item or just went to prom together. Their class had a reunion a month ago. Maybe they reconnected."

She raised her eyebrows. "Oh, and the wife caught them, so they did something to her? Or maybe they want to get her out of the way so they can be together." This was why Margarita and I had so quickly become good friends. We thought the same way.

"Maybe. And, get this, the old prom date was in here that night. I know she saw Florrie, but she told me she didn't see anyone."

"Who was it?"

“Cissy Clancy.”

“Oh, she gets takeout all the time.”

“I guess you wouldn’t know if she and Hugo Marz were a big item or if they went to their reunion.”

“Not if I didn’t cater it.”

“It was at the Old Mill.”

“Oh, that class. They talked to me about it, but I was already booked. But I know who might know. Mel over there was the organizer.” She gestured toward the corner booth, where a couple of women sat. “I’ll go find out.” She picked up a pitcher of water and went around the bar to make her way among the tables, pausing to chat with customers as she went. She refilled the water glasses at the corner booth and stood there chatting for some time. I wished I could hear what was being said. I couldn’t think of a casual way to ask if a particular pair of people I didn’t know had been at a class reunion I wasn’t part of, and asking questions was a big part of what I did for a living. I had no idea how Margarita might approach it. At least she had some connection to the event.

I forced myself not to stare because that would make whatever Margarita did look a lot more suspicious and instead forced myself to study the menu. I’d never been a “the usual” person and was trying to sample everything on the menu at least once, though I did occasionally return to an old favorite. Maybe this would be a good time to have a salad. There was a chopped salad with black beans and avocado that sounded good and was possibly even good for me. It seemed like blasphemy to have a salad at a Tex-Mex restaurant, but this was my fourth night in a row to eat here, so it was probably a good time to start investigating the salad section.

“Do you know what you want?” Margarita asked when she returned and caught me perusing the menu.

I gave her my order and let her turn it in to the kitchen before I demanded, “What did you learn?”

“Way too much about what people get up to thirty years after graduation. Let’s just say that this was a reunion in a lot of ways.

Hugo and Cissy weren't the only couple who got back together there."

I just about fell off my barstool. "They got back together there?"

"Not to the point of making out in a corner during the reunion, though apparently that did happen with some other couples. But they definitely clicked like no time had passed, according to Mel. And, yes, they were a couple in high school. Everyone was surprised that he ended up marrying someone else. I guess they split up when he went off to college and he met his future wife."

"What about his wife? Was she there?"

"They weren't sure. They don't remember seeing her, but they were pretty sure his reservation was for a couple."

Florrie's superpower seemed to have struck again. "I was already wondering if Hugo is really on a business trip or if it was an excuse to spend time with his old girlfriend, but this makes it really fishy."

"You say you saw Cissy here the same night Florrie was?"

"Yeah, she came in to pick up a to-go order."

"Her usual is a regular order of chicken fajitas, but I should have a record for the other night since she has an online ordering account. Let me check." She turned to the computer behind the bar and typed in some things. A moment later, she returned, grinning. "She ordered beef fajitas for two, so either she was planning for leftovers or she had company."

"She's not married?"

"She went alone to the reunion. Have you told Wes about Cissy?"

"Yeah. He wasn't impressed. Florrie hasn't been reported missing yet, so he's not actively investigating or looking for suspects."

"Because her husband hasn't been looking for her."

"Exactly my thought. He told me I have a vivid imagination and need to stay out of it."

She got a mischievous gleam in her eye. “I close early tonight. Maybe we could go for a drive.”

“Yeah, it wouldn’t hurt to tour the neighborhood. See what’s up. And maybe we could figure out where Florrie’s house-sitting.”

As closing time approached, I was the only customer remaining, so Margarita was able to lock the door instead of waiting for customers to leave. She filled a couple of to-go cups with soda and loaded a bag with leftover tortilla chips, and then we headed out through the rear exit to Margarita’s car. I directed her to where Florrie’s car had been left. We had maybe half an hour until it got truly dark, so we could clearly see the silver sedan still parked on the side of the road.

“They didn’t tow it away?” Margarita asked.

“Wes said it wasn’t parked illegally, and it hasn’t been there long enough to be considered abandoned.”

“And there was blood on the door handle?”

“Even Wes thought that’s what it looked like, but I haven’t heard if any test results have come back yet. While it’s still light, I want to check out some of the house-sitting possibilities near here. I looked up the houses with pools.” I directed her down the streets I’d identified, and none of them were under construction. There were alleys in this part of the neighborhood, so the driveways weren’t visible from the street. Margarita drove down a couple of the alleys so we could see if any had been torn up, and I didn’t see any reason why someone wouldn’t have parked at any of these houses.

“I can’t think of why she’d have left her car here,” Margarita said when we returned to where the car was.

“I know. That’s the thing that bugs me.”

“So, which house is Cissy’s?”

I pointed her toward that one, and she drove past it. There were lights on, but I couldn’t see inside. At the end of the block, Margarita turned down that alley and slowed to a crawl as we reached what should have been Cissy’s driveway. There were two

cars parked there. “She’s not alone,” I said. “You’re sure this is her place?”

“Look at the number over the garage.” It was the same address. Either a single woman who worked as a grocery store cashier had two cars, or she had company. Of course, that didn’t mean the company was Hugo, but I thought the odds were pretty good, given all the other evidence.

“Let’s drive by the front again,” I suggested.

It was fully dark by now, and light glowed golden and welcoming from the windows of the houses we passed. Maybe it was the same part of me that made me curious (or nosy) enough to be a journalist, but I’d always loved driving or walking through a neighborhood after dark when I could see lights in windows and get a glimpse of the lives that went on inside the homes. We reached Cissy’s house and Margarita slowed. There were sheer curtains at the large front window that probably provided some privacy during the day while letting in light, but at night all they did was blur things a bit. I saw a tall figure with hair in a ponytail—probably Cissy. She brought a drink to someone sitting in a chair before moving toward the window.

“Drive, drive!” I urged Margarita. I didn’t know if Cissy was looking out the window or merely coming to close the drapes, but I didn’t want to take any chances. Just before we were so far past that house that I could no longer see through the window, the window went dark, as though someone had pulled heavy drapes shut.

“Did you see anything?” Margarita asked.

“It looked like she brought a drink to someone who was sitting in the living room.”

“Aha!”

“We don’t know that it’s Hugo,” I cautioned, even though I felt in my gut that it had to be.

“Let’s take another run down that alley,” she suggested. “We might notice something else.”

“And I could get the license numbers on those cars. I’ve got a friend in Dallas who may be able to run them for me.”

At the end of the block, Margarita turned onto the side street, then down the alley. She slowed again behind Cissy’s house, but it was too dark to read the plates without getting out of the car and using a flashlight, and I figured that would be highly suspicious. “Maybe I’ll come back tomorrow while she’s at work,” I said.

“I’ll be doing some shopping in the morning, so I can let you know if she’s at the store so the coast will be clear for you.”

“Good plan,” I said.

We reached the end of the alley, and Margarita paused to check for oncoming traffic before pulling out. What we saw were flashing red and blue lights on a vehicle waiting by the end of the alley. “Oh, no,” she groaned as someone got out of that car and motioned for us to stop.

I couldn’t see much of the person approaching because the flashlight he held was blinding, blocking out anything behind it, but I wasn’t surprised to hear Wes’s voice say, “Oh, it’s you two. What are you up to?”

Chapter Eight

“Is there a problem, officer?” Margarita asked, the picture of innocence as she put the car in park.

“We got some neighborhood watch calls about a suspicious car driving back and forth down the street really slowly and down the alley a couple of times,” Wes said. “They thought someone might be casing the neighborhood.”

Margarita burst out in a loud guffaw. “Seriously? Then I’m lucky no one called the cops on me when I was in high school and had a huge crush on someone. I drove by his house all the time, seeing if he was home or if anyone was visiting him.”

“Are you stalking a particular crush now?” I was glad it was Margarita he was talking to and not me so I didn’t have to answer that question. He’d said he couldn’t read my mind well, but I didn’t want to take any chances.

“No one in particular at the moment. We were just exploring. I was showing Lexie around the historic district.”

“Really?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “Including our scenic alleys?” Looking past Margarita to me, he said, “I thought I told you to stay out of it. The last thing we need is Lucy and Ethel getting up to wacky crime solving shenanigans.”

“Aren’t you a little young for that pop-culture reference?” I asked. “Not to mention using the word ‘shenanigans’ unironically.”

“I watched reruns with my grandmother, and ‘shenanigans’ is a perfectly good word that applies to this situation. Let me guess,

you're scoping out Cissy's house."

"And looking for where Florrie might be house-sitting. I figured it might be near where her car was left, and we were trying to see if there was a reason she couldn't have parked closer to where she's house-sitting," I said.

"Did you find anything?"

"Nope, unfortunately," Margarita said. She held the paper bag of chips over to him. "Chip? Sorry, there's no salsa or queso because that would get messy in the car."

He ignored her offer. "Why don't you two go on home? I can't look out for your missing person if I'm having to respond to calls about prowlers alarming the neighbors."

"Is there that much crime in this neighborhood?" I asked. "The neighbors seem to be rather on-edge if they're calling about a car that's been parked for a few days and someone driving down the street and alley."

"There's little crime *because* the neighbors look out for each other."

"I'm glad I don't live here, then," Margarita said. "I don't need people that much in my business." I wasn't sure she had it much better, since she had Jordan's security cameras watching her place, but that wasn't something to bring up in front of Wes. She put the car in gear. "Is that all? Are we free to go?"

"For now, but if I find out there's been a break-in around here, you'll be my first suspects." He stepped back and signaled for us to drive away.

"I noticed you didn't tell him about there being two cars at Cissy's place," I said as Margarita turned the car back toward downtown.

"And neither did you."

"I could already hear the scoffing in my head, so there was no point."

"You think there's something to this?"

I sighed. "I don't know. I'd almost be willing to bet that the

other person at Cissy's place is Hugo. Whether they had anything to do with Florrie's disappearance, well, that I don't know. But it is suspicious."

"I'll head to the grocery store around ten, and I'll let you know if Cissy is there. Then you can get closer and check out the car she didn't take to work."

"Sounds like a plan. Thanks for driving tonight, and sorry to get you in trouble."

"You call that trouble? It wasn't even a strongly worded warning. Wes doesn't scare me." She pulled up near the rear stairs at my apartment. "It was actually kind of fun. It took me back to my young and stupid days."

"You really did stalk your crush?"

"Stalk' is such a harsh word. More like I conducted interested surveillance. I also had his class schedule memorized and knew where all his friends lived."

"Who was the guy who was worth all that effort?"

She laughed. "Would you believe, I don't remember! I had a few crushes, but now I can't recall which one I had it so bad for that I became some kind of private detective. Anyway, it was fun going back to that, but with a less silly motive."

After finalizing our plans for the next day, I ran upstairs to my apartment. I nearly jumped out of my skin when someone said, "What did you learn?" before I even turned on the light.

Once I realized it was Jean and got my breathing back to something close to normal, I said, "I thought we agreed that you left my apartment alone unless I invited you."

"You weren't here. So, what's the scoop? Tell me, and I'll leave you alone."

"I didn't learn anything other than that the ex and the husband did seem to hook up at the reunion, and the ex appears to have company. She lives alone, but she ordered for two that night, and there are two cars in her driveway."

"That's a lot to learn."

“I’m going to try to get license numbers from the cars—or whichever one is at the house while Cissy’s at work—tomorrow and see if one of them belongs to Hugo. After that, I don’t know. There’s still no reason for Wes to get involved as long as Florrie hasn’t officially been reported missing.”

“I hope this turns out to be a good story, for all the time you’ve spent on it.”

“I hope it doesn’t. That would mean something bad happened to Florrie. Lying to your wife about being on a business trip while you shack up with your high school girlfriend isn’t news any more than it’s a crime. Besides, it’s been the weekend. I’ve been on my own time.”

Now that I thought about it that way, I probably needed to get a real hobby.

Jean disappeared in a huff, and I went to the kitchen to put a kettle on. I’d need some herbal tea to relax if I wanted to get enough rest to be able to face Monday. Jean’s questions weighed on my mind. Why was I so obsessed with this? Was I truly only concerned about a woman I’d met once, or was there something else going on? Was I trying to prove something, to show that I’d noticed something no one else had? Or was I looking for excitement in whatever way I could find it?

I’d just taken my tea to the sofa when there was a knock at my door. It was late for visitors, especially in a town where things shut down when it got dark. With a groan, I got up and went to the door, where I pulled aside the lace curtain on the window set into the door. Wes stood there, still in uniform. I groaned again. He’d probably come to lecture me about meddling and getting him involved. I opened the door and said, “Honest, I came straight home after you caught us.”

“Can I come in?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Do you have a warrant?”

“This isn’t official business. I’m off-duty, on my way home, so ignore the uniform.”

Although I was wary, I was also a little excited about the opportunity. Now I was glad I'd done that shopping. I could offer him food. I stepped back and gestured for him to enter. "Be my guest. Would you like something to eat?"

"You cook?"

"I can open some fancy cheese I bought the other day and a box of crackers."

"They have fancy cheese in this town?"

"Maybe not by Dallas standards, but if you look in the deli instead of in the dairy section, they have a few good things."

"Okay, sure, I could eat. And I don't suppose you have any of that spicy orange tea."

I fought the urge to grin. I'd never have believed I'd turn him into a tea drinker, but he'd become a fan of herbal tea. I wondered if the other cops knew about that. "I just boiled a kettle. I'll make some for you. Make yourself comfortable."

While he took a seat on the sleek Art Deco chair facing the sofa, I went into the kitchen, where I turned on the electric kettle to reheat the water and dug the cheese out of the refrigerator. I couldn't think of why he'd visit me on his way home from work if it wasn't business. We were kind of friends, but not really the hang out in our free time sort of friends. I'd never even been to his place. I suspected this was an unofficial visit about business, so as I brought a tray from the kitchen to the living room and placed it on the coffee table, I braced myself for a lecture.

He served himself some cheese and crackers and sipped at his herbal tea before saying anything, which made me so tense that I lost any appetite I might have had. I held my mug, breathing the scent of the tea without actually drinking it. I thought I'd explode by the time he finally said, "Okay, Lex, this is totally off the record, but what's going on with this weird obsession of yours? Are you so bored and desperate for news? If you are, as much as I hate to do it, I'll work with you on an in-depth feature on the police department."

“You think I’m doing this for a story? Did it not cross your mind at all that I might just be concerned about this woman?” I knew that was a partial truth, which was why his accusation had stung. While I wasn’t working on a story, I’d already considered the possibility that I was looking for excitement.

He frowned. “You really think something’s wrong?”

“And you don’t, even after finding blood on her abandoned car?”

“No one other than you has reported her missing. She’s not in any of the registries, and I even called her town directly. I’m sure they think I’m nuts.”

“All that means is that no one in her life cares that much about her. Or they weren’t expecting to talk to her.”

“Or they know where she is. She didn’t come to your interview. That’s it. You’re taking it personally.”

I breathed in more of the steam from my tea before saying, “Maybe that’s it. I am taking it personally. I seem to be the only person who even noticed she existed, and that makes me the only one to know she’s gone. If a wife and mother could just vanish without anyone noticing, how many other people slip through the cracks?”

“Don’t worry, if you go missing, I’ll notice it.”

For a very brief moment, that thought warmed my heart, but then I realized what he probably meant. “Because you won’t be getting phone calls about wacky theories. And how many times have I been right?”

“You do have a good track record, but it’s a relatively small sample size. Maybe you’ve been lucky so far.”

“Remember, luck is my superpower. And speaking of superpowers, Jean thinks she knows what talent Florrie might have.” I explained it as well as I could, but it sounded kind of nuts when I said it out loud. “What if she’s someone people don’t think about when they’re not right there with her, and they barely notice her when she’s there? If she has that talent, it would be easy for

her to disappear.”

“That may be the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.” Before I could protest, he hurried to add, “Which means it’s fairly normal in this town. And it would explain a few cases I’ve worked. But we don’t know any of this. It’s all your conjecture.”

“There’s a second car parked behind Cissy’s house, and her classmates said she and Hugo did seem to be striking sparks at their reunion.”

“That’s why you were driving by tonight?”

“It was just out of curiosity. Margarita remembered that Cissy had ordered a meal for two Thursday night, which was unusual. There’s definitely another person at her house.”

“That may not have anything to do with your missing woman. People have company. It’s not unheard of. What might people think about my truck being parked at your place on a Sunday night?”

I wondered if he was worried about that, if that was the reason he hadn’t made any move to ask me out. Then again, he’d come here, so he wasn’t too worried about being seen at my place. “Maybe you should have parked around the corner.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t think anyone’s driving down the downtown alleys now that you and Margarita are at home.”

“So you don’t think anything’s up with Cissy?”

“I’ll admit, it does sound fishy. But it’s material for gossip, not law enforcement.”

“You’ll have to find a body before you do anything?”

“Or some evidence that there’s been any crime at all.”

“Blood on the car?” I reminded him.

“She could have had a cut or scrape when she opened the door.” He leaned over and sliced another hunk of cheese to put on a cracker. “This is actually pretty good. It’s in the deli, you say?”

“Yeah. My original idea was to eat at home more instead of spending all my time at Margarita’s. And I’ve eaten there every night lately, so I guess it didn’t work.”

"She's closed tomorrow, so you'll have to make do. I'm not eating your Monday dinner, am I?"

"Just part of the appetizer. I've got something else to attempt to make. I'm trying to learn to cook."

"The fire department moves pretty quickly, in case you need them."

"Ha ha, very funny."

He finished his tea, put his mug down, and stood. "Well, thanks for the snack. And sorry for barging in on you like this."

"But you want me to stay out of things," I said, airing what I was sure was his unspoken thought.

"I don't like it when I get called about things my friends are doing. It puts me in a difficult position."

"I'll try not to alarm the neighbors in the future."

"Or you could let me know what you're up to."

I walked with him to the door. "Then you'd tell me not to do it."

He paused in the doorway. "Exactly," he said with a grin before heading down the stairs. I closed the door and locked it behind him, then cleaned up and put the food away. His concern was touching, but I had no plans to let this go.

In fact, soon before ten the next morning, I was already driving toward Cissy's neighborhood. I was stopped at an intersection when my phone rang. It was Margarita, and I put her on speaker while I resumed driving. "She's here," she reported. "I think I recognize one of the cars from her driveway in the parking lot, but I'm not sure."

"I'm less worried about the car than I am about her," I said. "Thanks for the tip."

"Let me know what you find."

I ended the call just before I made the turn down Cissy's alley. One of the cars was still parked there. I quickly snapped a picture of the license plate, then drove on. The last thing I needed was another neighborhood watch call. I paused at the next intersection

to e-mail the license number to a contact I'd made during my Dallas newspaper reporting days to see if he could find out who the car was registered to. Then the thought of the neighborhood watch gave me an idea. I drove to near where Florrie's car still sat and parked in front of the house where I'd seen the neighbor watching from her front porch. I took one of my reporting notebooks out of the glove compartment, got out and went up to the front door, which opened before I could ring the bell.

"Hi, I'm Lexie Lincoln with the *Gazette*," I said. "I'm working on a story about the importance of neighborhood watch organizations, and I understand the group in this neighborhood is one of the most effective. Are you involved with the neighborhood watch?"

The woman's expression went from wary to bright. "Oh, yes! We have the absolute best watch. Nothing gets past us."

"Have you seen anything suspicious lately?"

"There have been a few prowlers the last couple of days, but the cops got here in time to scare them away before they could break into anyone's house."

"That's good," I said, trying not to look guilty. "Do you have a lot of break-ins?"

"We had a few earlier this year. You know, when all that jewelry was being stolen."

I definitely remembered that case. It had been one of those things where I felt something was going on and it took me a while to convince Wes. You'd think he'd have learned by now to listen to me when I thought there was a crime.

We chatted a bit more, but in spite of asking all the leading questions I could think of, I couldn't get her to mention noticing anything odd at Cissy's house. She hadn't noticed when Florrie's car was parked. I'd thought she was the stereotypical nosy neighbor who justifies her curiosity as being part of the neighborhood watch, but if she was spying on her neighbors, she was keeping what she'd learned to herself.

My alibi established—and with some good notes for a

legitimate article—I went on to a few other nearby houses, focusing on those I thought were possible places where Florrie might be house-sitting. People came to the door for the first two houses on that list, which allowed me to eliminate them, but there were two more where no one responded. Finally, I got around to Cissy's house. There was no answer to the doorbell, but I was pretty sure I saw the curtains nearest the door twitch. I felt positive someone was there. Or else Cissy had a curious but quiet pet.

“Working on a big story?” my assistant, Charlene Robinson, asked when I returned to the office.

“Not really,” I said. “This is something personal.” I gave her a quick rundown of the weekend's activities.

“Good for you,” she said. “Too many people are practically invisible to the world, and we all need to look out for each other.”

“See? That's exactly what I thought, but Wes thinks I'm nuts, like I'm blowing it out of proportion.”

“Trust your gut. It seldom lies.”

Sitting down at my computer, I uploaded the photo I'd taken at Cissy's house so I could take a closer look. Maybe there was something I hadn't noticed, since I hadn't dared linger. There was nothing remarkable about the car. In fact, it looked a lot like Florrie's car, though it was a bit larger, probably the next model up. I squinted and peered at something just above the license plate. I couldn't tell if it was a shadow or a smudge. I enlarged the photo to fill the screen, and I was pretty sure it was a handprint, just where someone would lift the trunk. And, if I wasn't mistaken, it was blood.

My e-mail dinged, and it was an answer from my friend. The car was registered to Hugo Marz. I should have been elated, but I felt sick. There weren't many good reasons for Hugo's car to be at Cissy's house. Stirling Mills wasn't between his home and Dallas, so it wouldn't make sense for him to leave his car with Cissy while she drove him to the airport. And then there was that bloody handprint.

I knew Wes needed to know about this, but I felt like the girl who'd cried "missing person." I'd called him about so many things that he hadn't considered important that he was probably primed to dismiss anything else I told him about this case. I could hear him tell me there wasn't much he could do. He didn't have probable cause to be checking out a car parked on private property when he had no reason to think a crime had taken place, and I hadn't noticed the blood while just driving by. It had only shown up when I enlarged the photo, so he couldn't claim to have noticed it while patrolling the alley.

I was still sitting there, stewing over what I should do, when my cell phone rang, and I saw Wes's name on the screen. I sighed. One of the neighbors in the keenest neighborhood watch group on earth had probably called about a strange car in the alley. That eagle-eyed neighbor was probably on high alert after the mysterious prowling the night before and didn't connect it to the reporter talking to the neighbors about the neighborhood watch group. So, did I tell Wes what I'd learned, or wait?

I reached out to pick up the phone, a feeling of dread pooling in my stomach. "Hey, what's up?" I asked, trying to sound casual and innocent.

"Well, looks like you were right," he said.

"About what? I'm right about so many things."

"Florence Marz was just reported missing by her daughter."

Chapter Nine

I gulped, unable to form words for a moment. All this time, I'd been frantic about the possibility that Florrie was missing and no one cared, and now that it had been confirmed that she really was missing, I couldn't feel vindicated. I was only worried. "Wha-what happened?" I asked, stumbling over my words.

"The daughter's been trying to reach her mother since Saturday afternoon and finally got worried enough to call the police in her hometown, and since I'd already called them to check, they called me," Wes said. "I just talked to the daughter."

"Did she know about the house-sitting?"

"No. In fact, she thought her mother was supposed to be at a school year kickoff luncheon on Friday, so she didn't think she'd left town. She's been calling the home number and her mother's cell all weekend."

"And her mother left the cell in her car—or someone did. The luncheon may be why she didn't show for the interview."

"It turns out it was cancelled at the last minute. The daughter checked with one of her mother's coworkers before calling the police and found out that no one had seen Florence since Thursday morning."

"What about her husband? Has he spoken to her?"

"He's out of town and says he hasn't called home."

Yeah, right, I thought. If they checked the location of his phone, they'd find he was a lot closer than Vegas.

“Since you may have been the last person to see Florence—and you were apparently the only person who saw her—I’m going to need you to come in and make a statement.”

I swallowed the sarcastic remark I wanted to make about how I’d been trying to do that for days. This wasn’t the time to score points. “Of course. And I may have some info for you.” That bloody handprint was even more disturbing now that I knew Florrie really was missing.

“I’m not sure I want to hear it. Since this is now an actual investigation, I want to go about things the right way, through proper channels. I can’t build a case around tips I get from a reporter.”

“I think you’ll want to know this. I can tell you when I get there.”

When I ended the call, I looked across the office to Charlene. “She’s now officially missing.” In this situation, I couldn’t celebrate being right.

“Oh, no! I hope she’s okay. I’ll say a prayer for her.”

“Yeah, that would be good. I need to go talk to the police since I may be the last person to have seen her.”

“I’ll manage things here.” She gave me a worried frown. “Maybe you should have a cup of tea before you go. You look a little shaken.”

“Wes is expecting me. I need to get going.” But I did feel shaky when I stood, like my legs weren’t quite up to supporting me.

“You can walk and drink at the same time.”

That was true. I poured some tea from the pot I kept on a warmer into a travel mug, and though I usually didn’t sweeten my tea, I added a packet of sugar. The hot, strong, sweet tea would help settle me by the time I made it to the police station, I hoped. It was only a few blocks away, not far enough to bother driving—if I even trusted myself to drive at the moment—and by the time I got there, the combination of the tea, fresh air, and exercise had worked off most of my shock, so I was able to face Wes without

worrying that I'd burst into tears or fumble my words. I was also able to replay everything I knew in my mind to make sure I was separating what I actually knew from speculation and interpretation. I'd spent so much time thinking about this case that there was a lot to sort out to get back to the core details.

"Thanks for coming in so quickly," Wes said when he came out to the front desk to meet me. He didn't quite meet my eyes, which gave me the impression that he had the good grace to feel at least a teeny bit ashamed of dismissing my concerns.

I pledged to myself that I would take the high road and not gloat about being right. "Of course. I want to help. As I've been saying for days." Okay, so I couldn't resist a little dig at him.

He winced. "I know. Back this way." He escorted me to his office and gestured for me to take a seat. I couldn't help but remember my first day in town when I'd sat there to be interviewed as a possible murder suspect. Now I was a witness, which I supposed was an upgrade. He sat at his desk and turned to his computer, pulling up an electronic form. "Can you tell me about the last time you saw Florence Marz?" With a glance at me, he added, "And, yes, I know you've already told me. But this is the official version, so just the facts, with no speculation."

I went through the whole story about Thursday night at Margarita's, giving approximate times and everything Florrie had told me. He stopped me after I told about her not showing up for the interview and not answering the phone. "Anything else from this point on is conjecture or gossip."

"So you don't want to put the fact that no one else remembers seeing her or that we had a séance in case she was a ghost in your report?" I didn't expect him to, but I couldn't resist having a little fun.

His eyes went wide with alarm. "Of course not!"

"You did note that I'm pretty sure Cissy Clancy saw her at Margarita's."

"I did."

“And you should also—”

He cut me off. “Nope, I don’t want to hear it. I’ve got a full crew out canvassing the neighborhood near where Florence’s car was found. Anything you noticed while snooping around, they’ll surely find.”

“Only if they know what to look for.”

“You don’t think my officers, who grew up in this town and know just about everybody, won’t know what to look for?”

“It depends on what they know or suspect.”

“We’re supposed to find evidence and build a case from there, not look for evidence to support the case we’ve already dreamed up.”

I managed not to give a derisive snort. I’d known plenty of cops who did exactly that. “Yeah, but there are some things that look totally innocent unless you know what to look for.”

“My people know what to look for. Let’s just say that one member of that team was in the same class as Hugo.”

It was my turn to widen my eyes. “Oh! Then they may know what to look for. And the husband is usually the first suspect when a woman goes missing, so looking up people associated with the husband is an automatic part of an investigation.” That should mean they’d notice the car in the driveway and, I hoped, the bloody handprint.

Sure enough, a moment later Wes’s radio squawked, and when Wes responded, a crackly voice said, “Boss, there’s something out here you need to see. We’ll need some evidence collection, while we’re at it. Maybe a warrant.”

“On my way. I’ll get the details from you in a bit,” Wes said, then cut off the radio. To me, he added, “Is there anything else you need to tell me that comes from your direct experience talking to Florence Marz?”

“No, that’s all.” I was already on my feet, and I followed at Wes’s heels as he rushed to the door.

When I headed to the passenger door of his police vehicle, he

stopped me. “Nope. I can’t show up at a potential crime scene with a reporter in the truck with me.”

But I noticed that he hadn’t said anything about me not being there at all. The cop on the radio hadn’t given a precise location, but I suspected I knew what he meant. They’d found the car. Before Wes had even started the engine, I was already sprinting down the street. Fortunately, I’d parked in front of the office after the morning’s excursion, so I didn’t have to go around to the garage at the back of the building. I wasn’t too far behind Wes when I headed toward Cissy’s house. It helped that I knew exactly where I was going, while I guessed he had to get back on the radio to get specifics once I was out of earshot.

I parked on the street near the alley exit, making sure I wasn’t near a hydrant or anything else that would give them an excuse to ticket me, and ran down the alley toward Cissy’s driveway. I was panting, and I was sure my face was bright red with exertion and the heat. I kept saying I was going to start exercising more, and this reminded me that I needed to make good on that promise, especially if I was going to keep getting involved in solving crimes.

There was already crime scene tape strung around Cissy’s driveway, so it looked like my guess had been correct. I hadn’t had a chance to call one of our freelance photographers, so I snapped some photos of the scene with my phone. If Florrie was found safe and alive by the time I went to press, this wouldn’t be much of a story, but I needed to be prepared in case she wasn’t. Mostly, I was here for my own curiosity, I had to admit.

An officer was taking pictures of the rear of the car. Other officers were going over the outside of the car like rental agents looking for scratches they could bill for after the car was returned. Wes had arrived just ahead of me and parked in the alley, right behind the crime scene tape. He stood nearby, talking to one of the officers. After the officer finished his report, Wes glanced at me. He didn’t tell me to go away, which was a nice change of pace. “I take it the bloody handprint on Hugo’s car was what you wanted to tell

me about,” he said.

“Yep. Good work. You’re now caught up with me.”

I couldn’t see his eyes behind his sunglasses, but I was pretty sure the look he gave me was withering. “And how many days did it take you to find out what we did in a couple of hours?”

“Come on, you’ve got to admit that I gave you a head start, since you already knew some of what I found. It would have taken you longer to get here otherwise. And I was only so slow because people kept telling me I was imagining things. I had to prove I wasn’t entirely crazy first.”

Some neighbors had come out into the alley to watch the commotion, but one thing that was oddly missing was anyone from Cissy’s house. If the cops were crawling all over the driveway, you’d think that anyone who was home would come out to see what was going on, unless they weren’t supposed to be there and were hiding. I sidled closer to Wes and said softly, “I think someone’s in the house.”

“And how would you know that?”

“You talking about the neighborhood watch around here gave me a story idea, so I went door-to-door to interview people about the neighborhood watch. The curtains twitched after I rang the doorbell here, but no one came to the door, and I didn’t hear barking, so it wasn’t a dog, unless it’s a really well-behaved one.”

He quirked a skeptical eyebrow above the frame of his sunglasses. “Really? You’re doing a story on the neighborhood watch?”

“Look for it in the next issue.” Which meant now I really was committed to writing it.

“If you need more sources, I think they’re all out here,” he noted, tilting his chin toward the assembled neighbors.

I wasn’t sure how all these neighbors knew what was going on in the alley, since the houses nearby were all single-story and the backyard fences were high. Did they have treehouse surveillance platforms? Security cameras facing the alley? Periscopes? They

probably had a phone tree, so they could spread word through the whole neighborhood in minutes. Whatever it was, the crowd grew. It would take a really brave or stupid criminal to target this neighborhood. There'd be no getting away with anything around here, and that probably extended beyond criminal behavior. They had to already know Cissy had a visitor, even if they didn't know for certain who he was.

"It's human blood!" one of the cops at the car called out. The onlookers gasped.

Wes nodded an acknowledgement, with a bit of a glare at the officer, probably for being too loud about that announcement, then turned abruptly and got in his truck, which he drove out of the alley. I had a feeling I knew where he was going, so I jogged down the alley and around the corner. He must have stopped to talk to the cop sitting in the car that was already parked there because I made it to the front of the house just as he headed up the walk. I figured that if I stayed on the edge of the street, I was totally within my rights and Wes couldn't say anything about me interfering or trespassing. I hoped I could hear anything that was said from where I stood.

Wes rang the doorbell and waited a moment. The curtains twitched, then were pulled tight and went still. I imagined that if you were hiding out somewhere you weren't supposed to be, seeing a police officer on the front porch would be alarming. I pictured Hugo cowering under a bed or at the back of a closet. When no one came to the door, Wes banged on it and shouted, "Police! I need you to open up." Nothing happened. Wes turned and headed back down the sidewalk, saying into his radio as he walked, "Get someone over to the Food Mart and escort Cissy Clancy home, now. Tell her she needs to get back for something urgent."

"You can't just kick the door in?" I asked when he neared me.

"I might be able to, since we have a missing person and her husband's car with blood on it parked here, but I'd rather keep this

tidy. It's not as though he can escape." He gestured toward the cop sitting in the car.

"What about Florrie? He might be doing something to her in there."

"I doubt he's kept her tied up in there all this time. And would he be so worried about being caught cheating if he knew she either already knew or was dead?"

"I don't know. It's hard for me to understand how the sort of person who'd say he's on a business trip while he hangs out with his high school girlfriend might think. Maybe he just doesn't want you to find the body."

"If there's a body, it's too late." I swallowed a lump in my throat at the thought.

By this time, neighbors across the street were standing on their porches, watching the goings on. Police vehicles parked on the street and a cop banging on a neighbor's door must have been the ultimate in excitement for an active neighborhood watch group. They certainly had a lot to watch today. I thought about interviewing some of them about what they'd seen going on around Cissy's house, but I was more interested in what was going on with the car. That was where the action was right now. I began heading back in that direction. Wes got in his truck and drove back to the alley, passing me with a wave. With a whimper, I trudged around the corner and down the alley. It was a pity Margarita's was closed on Mondays because I'd more than earned a big plate of enchiladas with all this running around.

The cops were still checking out the car when I got back there. They hadn't opened any of the doors, so I didn't know what they expected to find. This was probably where noticing that particular kind of mud or bit of a plant might come in, if that wasn't merely a TV plot point. I took a couple more pictures. One of the neighbors approached me and asked, "Do you know what's going on?"

I didn't know how much Wes wanted me to tell, but I figured it was safer to let them know at least the basics instead of letting

them speculate. “A woman’s been reported missing. Her car was found near here. This is her husband’s car, and it has blood on it. He’s supposed to be in Vegas on a business trip.” I thought that was a good “just the facts” summary without any conjecture.

“Is he here, or is he also missing?” the neighbor asked.

“I have no idea,” I said. It hadn’t occurred to me that Hugo might also be in danger. Was Cissy some kind of bunny boiler who’d kidnapped her ex and eliminated her rival? I pictured her hijacking him as he headed to the airport. But if that were the case and he was the person in the house, he’d have come running out, begging for help, instead of hiding.

“What the hell is going on here?” came a shout from behind me, and I couldn’t help but jump when I turned to see Cissy, still in her cashier’s uniform, standing by her car, which was stopped in the alley. My mental image of her hijacking Hugo was so strong that it took me a moment to remember it was all in my head. Maybe Wes was right about my imagination being a little too active.

“What are you doing at my house?” Cissy demanded, her voice booming through the alley. It wasn’t a huge stretch to picture the breastplate and horned helmet on her. If she’d had a spear, Wes might not have survived approaching her.

“Ma’am, is this your house?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“You’re Cissy Clancy?”

“Yeah. You need to see some ID to prove it? What’s going on? Why did you have me dragged away from work like some kind of common criminal?”

“Did the officer who came to get you treat you with any disrespect?”

“Well, no,” she admitted.

“Did he put you in a police car?”

“No. He let me drive myself. But it doesn’t look good when a cop comes to get you at work, right in front of all the customers.

Now, what's the emergency?"

"Is this your car?" He gestured toward the car parked in her driveway.

She hesitated, and I could see the calculation going on behind her eyes as she tried to figure out how much he knew and what it was safe to say. "It belongs to a friend," she finally said.

"Where is your friend? I need the owner of the car to open the trunk for me. Is the owner at your house?"

Another hesitation. "I don't know. He's been visiting."

"No one has answered the door."

"He might have gone out."

"Without his car?"

"He could have gone for a walk."

"Well, if he's not here, then we'll have to bust the trunk open."

"What? Don't you need a warrant, or something?"

"I have all the cause I need to open that vehicle, and I have a warrant on the way. But we can save a lot of time and trouble if you cooperate. At the moment, you're not a direct subject of our investigation, but the vehicle is on your property, so you might be considered an accessory, and obstructing the investigation wouldn't look good."

"I don't have the keys."

"Can you get to them?"

"I don't know. It depends on whether he took the keys with him."

"Can you go see if you can find the keys? Or do I need to send an officer in to look for them?"

"Can't I at least ask what this is all about?"

"You can, but I'm not going to answer at this time." It was nice to hear that he was like that with everyone he dealt with on the job, not just me.

Her shoulders dipped slightly in defeat. "Okay then. I'm sure he'd want to help and has nothing to hide. I'll go see if I can find the keys." She reached into her car and brought out a garage door

opener. "You'll have to let me past that crime scene tape."

Wes escorted her to the perimeter and lifted the tape for her to duck under. He nodded to one of the cops working on the car, and she walked over to Cissy. "Officer Thornton will escort you inside," he said.

I thought for a moment that Cissy would put up a fight. She even opened her mouth to argue, but before she said anything, she shook her head, dismissing whatever thought she'd had, and clicked the opener. The door rolled upward, revealing a garage full of boxes and old furniture. That explained the cars parked in the driveway. I wondered if anything stored in the garage was valuable enough to balance against keeping her married boyfriend's car out in the open while he was supposed to be in Vegas. This probably wouldn't have been happening if the car had been in the garage all along.

Cissy and the officer made their way down a narrow path through the garage and into the house. I wondered if Hugo had known to take cover or if they'd catch him in there. Lying to his wife and cheating on her wasn't technically a crime, but it didn't look good for him if he was doing that while his wife was missing. It would probably look worse, though, if they got a warrant to search the house and didn't find him until then.

They came out a few minutes later, without Hugo. Cissy reluctantly handed the keys to Officer Thornton, who handed them over to the officer examining the car. He opened the trunk, and I held my breath, dreading what they might find in there.

"Oh my God," the officer said.

Chapter Ten

Wes moved toward the car, and I instinctively took a step forward before remembering that I wasn't allowed to go beyond the crime scene tape. I watched Wes's face carefully as he looked inside the trunk. I was pretty sure I saw an expression of horror before he got himself under control. "Get pictures and collect evidence," he instructed. An officer with a camera came over and snapped pictures of the inside of the trunk.

Wes turned to face the crowd watching the proceedings, and his gaze stopped on me. "Miss Lincoln, can you please come over here?"

Him calling me "Miss Lincoln" made me feel like my mother was using my full name, but I didn't think I was in trouble. Someone was, but for once it wasn't me. I ducked under the crime scene tape and approached Wes, who escorted me to the car.

"Can you identify these items?" Wes asked me with a gesture at the open trunk.

I couldn't believe my luck. I was not only getting a look at the trunk to find out what was in there, but I was being *asked* to look, so I didn't have to sneak around. The first thing I spotted was a purse. My mind flashed back to that night at Margarita's and the big, slouchy bag Florrie had slung over her shoulder when she made a rapid departure. "It looks like the purse Florence Marz had with her Thursday night," I said, feeling a bit queasy.

One of the officers angled a flashlight to spotlight something

that glittered in the trunk. I leaned closer to see an earring. "Does that look familiar?" Wes asked me.

I couldn't summon a clear mental image of Florrie's face, but the big, dangly earrings she wore popped out at me. "I'm pretty sure Florrie was wearing those earrings," I said.

"And what about this?" Wes asked as the officer directed the flashlight beam to a single woman's shoe.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't think I got a look at her feet. Contrary to popular belief, women don't always notice each other's shoes." Near the earring was a tangled length of nylon rope, like the kind used on boats. I felt dizzy. This was even worse than what I'd been imagining.

I heard a roaring in my ears, and the world started to go black around the edges. I don't remember what happened immediately after that, but the next thing I knew, I wasn't on my feet anymore, but I was still somehow moving. A voice coming from close to my ear called out, "Does anyone have any water for Lexie?"

"I can go get some," another voice said. Cissy?

"You stay right where you are," Wes ordered. That was the voice close to me. I didn't realize until I was being put inside a car and being hit with a blast of air conditioning that he'd been carrying me, cradled in his arms like a damsel in distress. And I hadn't even been conscious enough to enjoy it.

"I didn't faint," I told him.

"No, you just took a momentary break from consciousness," he said, but as he leaned over, I thought he looked truly concerned.

"It was the heat," I said. With all the running around I'd done, it was no wonder I'd gone woozy. That might have happened even without any shock.

"That's why I put you in the car where it's air conditioned." He pressed his palm against my forehead and frowned as he concentrated. "You're sweating and not too clammy, so that's a good sign." An officer brought a bottle of water over from one of the police vehicles, and I took it gratefully.

After I'd had a good drink of water, I felt a little steadier. The dizziness and queasiness had faded. "Was there anything else I needed to look at?" I asked.

"No, that was it. Thank you. You take it easy for a moment. You need to be more careful in the heat. Drink the rest of that water."

Fortunately, I was still able to watch what was going on from where I sat. In fact, I had a better view because I was still inside the crime scene tape.

"We need to search that house," Wes said when he returned to the cluster of officers beside Hugo's car.

"Can you tell me what this is about?" Cissy demanded, getting up in his face. "What did you find?" She craned her neck like she was trying to see, but Wes herded her away from the car.

"Do you know Hugo Marz?" he asked her.

"We dated in high school. Thirty years ago, so I don't know how that's relevant."

"When did you last see him?"

She hesitated and glanced quickly toward the car. This was a tricky calculation for her. Surely she knew that they'd probably already determined the owner of the car and therefore had a good guess as to the identity of her visitor. There was no saving face here, and a lie could get her in trouble. "He, uh, well, he's been visiting me."

"Hugo Marz is the visitor you referred to?" Wes asked.

"Yeah." She drawled out the word like a kid reluctantly admitting to taking a cookie from the jar.

"Where is he now?"

"I didn't see him inside," Officer Thornton said.

"He must be in the back of the house. Or he might be out," Cissy said.

"Do you know Florence Marz?" Wes asked.

"I met her at our class reunion last month. She was there with Hugo."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

Cissy started to speak, then stopped herself as she glanced at me. I gave her a smile. She winced and said to Wes, "I think she might have been at Margarita's on Thursday night."

"So, you knew she was in town. Did her husband know?"

"We didn't discuss her. I'd practically forgotten seeing her by the time I got home." I couldn't tell if she was giving an excuse for having told me she hadn't seen Florrie or if it was the truth and Jean was right about Florrie having an uncanny talent for blending in to the woodwork.

"Did his wife know where he was?"

A look of sheer panic spread over her face. She was caught and she knew it. "I-I don't know. I think he told her he had to take a business trip to Vegas, but I don't know exactly what lie he told her." It sounded like she was throwing Hugo under the bus.

"Do you know if he's tried to contact his wife or if he's heard from her since Thursday?"

"I don't think so, unless he did it while I was at work." Some of her gumption returned as she straightened her shoulders and demanded, "Tell me what this is about. Last time I checked, it wasn't against the law to spend time with an old friend. I don't see how any of this is any of your business."

"It becomes my business when the old friend's wife is reported missing and her car is found abandoned near his girlfriend's house, where his car is parked with his wife's purse in the trunk, on the same day he told the police he's in Vegas. May we enter your house to see if he's there? As I said, there's a warrant on the way, but it will save us all a lot of time if we don't have to wait."

She wilted, all the fight going out of her, and nodded. "Yeah, you might as well go inside."

"We won't conduct a full search until I have the warrant in my hand, but I want to determine whether Hugo Marz is in Stirling Mills and is present at this location. And if there's any sign of Florence Marz in there."

"What? No! She's not in there," Cissy insisted, and I was fairly

certain she was sincere. This wasn't an act. "I'd know if she was in my house."

"Yes, but it doesn't hurt to check," Wes said. He nodded to Officer Thornton, who acknowledged his nod and headed back to the house with another officer. While I waited to see what they found, I drank my water and tried not to think about what the things in the trunk probably meant. There weren't a lot of good explanations for a woman's purse, one shoe, one earring, and a length of rope being in the trunk of a car, not when they were things she'd been wearing or carrying the last time she was seen. I'd never been so sorry to be right before in my life. I would have loved to find out that Florrie had been lounging by the pool, blissfully cut off from the world, all this time. I might have been irked that she'd skipped her appointment with me, but that still beat the alternative that currently seemed likely.

A few minutes later, a man emerged, Officer Thornton behind him and the other officer at his side, as though making sure he didn't try to run. It had to be Hugo Marz. He looked a lot like he had in the yearbook, with a bit of a paunch around his middle and possibly less hair, but still more or less square. He wore elastic-waist shorts, a T-shirt, and flip-flops, and he looked like he hadn't shaved or showered in days. I'd have thought a woman as striking as Cissy could have done better than him, but it was possible they had a deep emotional connection, even after all these years, and physical appearance didn't matter to them.

I thought there was a look of terror in his eyes as he surveyed the scene, but he made a valiant effort to hide it as he approached Wes. "What seems to be the problem, officer?" he asked, hooking his thumbs in the waistband of his shorts. He sounded like he'd just been pulled over for speeding and was going to try to bluff his way out of a ticket.

"You're Hugo Marz?"

"Um, yes." I got the impression he wasn't sure he wanted to be at that moment.

“I’m Lieutenant Mosby, Stirling Mills Police. We spoke an hour or so ago on the phone.”

Hugo’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he gulped. “Yeah.”

“Didn’t you tell me you were in Las Vegas?”

There were titters among the bystanders in the alley. If I’d had a popcorn machine, I could have made a fortune. This was definitely a time to make popcorn and settle in for a good show.

Hugo went pale, all the color draining from his face and down past the neckline of his T-shirt. “Um, well, I, you see, that was the original plan, and I hadn’t told anyone I hadn’t gone. I didn’t think it mattered.”

“You lied to the police about your whereabouts when I called you to notify you that your wife had been reported missing?”

“Like I told you on the phone, my daughter was probably blowing things out of proportion. Florrie just went away for the weekend. She was mad that I wouldn’t take her with me to Vegas, so I bet she took her own trip and didn’t tell anyone.”

“Did you actually go to Vegas?”

Hugo gave a shifty look. “This week, or ever?”

I thought Wes showed great restraint in not pulling out his gun and forcing this guy to give him a straight answer. “This week,” he said, clenching his teeth between words.

“Uh, well, no. I’ve been here since Wednesday. It was a change of plans. The trip to Vegas got cancelled.”

“Did your wife know you were here rather than in Vegas?”

He paused, glancing around, like he was trying to decide just how much the police knew. Unfortunately, he didn’t glance at Cissy, who was frantically shaking her head. “Of course.”

“But you just said you didn’t tell anyone you hadn’t gone to Vegas.”

“Oh. Well, um, I meant my daughter.”

“You told your wife that your business trip to Vegas was cancelled and you were going to spend that time with your high school girlfriend, instead?”

“I didn’t exactly put it like that, but yeah, she knew I was coming here. My family’s from here.”

Wes turned to me. “Miss Lincoln, is that what Mrs. Marz told you when you spoke on Thursday night?”

I knew he knew what she’d said because I’d told him multiple times, but I figured he was messing with Hugo, and I was happy to join in. “No. She told me all about how her husband got to take a business trip to Vegas and didn’t want her to come along.” Wes turned back to Hugo and waited for a response.

“So, I lied about a few things,” Hugo said with a shrug. “No, I didn’t tell my wife where I was really going. I didn’t want her to worry.”

“It was for your wife’s own good that you told her you were going to Vegas but instead went to stay with your high school girlfriend?” Wes asked, sounding like he could hardly believe what he was hearing. I wondered what he was picking up mentally. There were enough people around that there would be a lot of thoughts to overhear, and from the way he described his ability, I guessed he wouldn’t be able to tell which thoughts were Hugo’s unless they were alone together. There was probably a lot of speculation from the onlookers about what Hugo was doing that could be mixed up with what Hugo himself was thinking.

“We were just reconnecting, seeing where things went,” Hugo said with another shrug. “No point in getting Florrie upset until I knew what was up and decided what I wanted.”

“What?” screeched Cissy, who had truly gone into Valkyrie mode. “This was some kind of audition before you committed to leaving your wife?”

Hugo moved away from her, but he didn’t seem to fear her at all. He was either really brave or really stupid. “Hey, no point in blowing up my marriage until I knew it was more than just sparks flying at the reunion.”

The neighbors gasped and made tut-tutting noises. They knew he was digging his own grave. It was a pretty good bet that Hugo

would come out of this event without either a wife or a girlfriend, even if his wife was alive and well. “That’s not what you said to me,” Cissy screeched.

“Come on,” Hugo said. “We’d barely spoken in thirty years. Yeah, there were some sparks that are definitely lacking in my marriage, but you didn’t expect me to just ditch my wife without being sure we really have something. And we do, babe. This weekend was the best in my life, and I’m definitely leaving her for you.”

Cissy’s expression softened ever so slightly, but she kept her hands on her hips. Hugo gave her puppy-dog eyes, and she softened still more. At any moment, I feared they’d be in each other’s arms.

Wes cleared his throat and stepped between them, keeping that from happening. “Sir, I have to ask again if you know where your wife is. The truth this time.”

“I have no idea!” Hugo said. “Really.”

“If she were going to be house-sitting for anyone in Stirling Mills, do you know who it would be?”

Hugo shook his head. “Nope. Sorry. I don’t know who all her friends are. She has family here, I know.”

Wes turned to the cops working on the car. “Finish processing the car, then tow it. We’re treating it as evidence.”

“What?” Hugo said, sputtering. “What am I supposed to do without a car?”

“You won’t be needing it anytime soon,” Wes said. “We’ll be happy to drive you to the police station.”

“Why? You’ve got nothing on me.”

“You lied to me. That’s a crime. It impeded the course of an investigation. And it looks particularly suspicious, given that your wife’s purse was found in your trunk, along with a bit of rope. Can you explain that?”

“Huh?” Hugo’s jaw hung agape, like his brain couldn’t process this information. It looked to me like genuine shock. For the first

time, I started to wonder if Hugo actually had anything to do with Florrie's disappearance. Yeah, he was a real slimeball who was cheating on his wife and not treating his girlfriend very well, and he was a liar, but unless he was a brilliant actor who'd missed his calling, I didn't think he was a kidnapper or killer. Or, if he was, the things in the trunk weren't related to his crime.

But if he hadn't done anything to Florrie, why were her belongings in his trunk? She might have left her phone in her car, but what about her purse? I could have thought the items in the trunk had maybe fallen out of a donation bag on the way to a Goodwill drop-off box if I hadn't seen her wearing those things the last time anyone saw her. I hadn't had a good look at the lock on the trunk, so I didn't know if it had been broken into.

Then again, it was likely that Florrie had keys to her husband's car, and those would have been in her purse. If Hugo hadn't done anything to her, that meant that whoever it was who had taken her had also known which car was her husband's and had left her belongings there. I supposed that would be a good way to throw the police off-track. If they were focusing on Hugo, then that bought the real kidnapper a lot more time.

I drained the last of the water from the bottle and cautiously got to my feet. I was feeling a lot better, and I figured the excitement here was about to be over. While Wes interrogated Hugo at the police station, I could start trying to figure out who else might have taken Florrie and why. Was it about Florrie herself, or did someone want to hurt Hugo? As I recalled, Florrie had said he owned a company that installed alarm systems. Maybe someone was trying to use Florrie as a hostage to get the codes to a particular alarm and they'd miscalculated badly when Hugo figured they were doing him a favor by getting his wife out of the way.

I shook my head. There I went again, spinning a story. Maybe Wes was right. I needed to look at the evidence and keep the narrative out of it until I knew more facts.

I stepped out of the way as Wes hustled Hugo toward his SUV. He hadn't put Hugo in cuffs, and I doubted Hugo would be at the police station long. He'd probably be released on bail as soon as he got in touch with his lawyer. Wes just needed to get him away from the crowd so he could get a good read on him, and that lie about his whereabouts was the perfect excuse.

Now that the shouting had ended, the neighbors were starting to drift away. The ones who remained either stared at Cissy like she was a sideshow exhibit—come see the Amazing Scarlet Woman!—or watched Hugo being put in the back of the police vehicle. Word of their affair was probably going to spread pretty quickly around Stirling Mills. I wondered if it would also make it over to where Hugo lived. It might affect Hugo's business if it did. People might not want to trust a man who'd been arrested for lying to the police to install their alarm systems.

As I started to head to my car, I paused. There had been someone vaguely familiar in the crowd of neighbors. I turned back to look again. It was probably someone I'd interviewed that morning, but that wasn't the familiarity that was puzzling my brain. There was something else, just out of reach. I scanned the crowd, and my eyes stuck on a woman wearing a large sun hat and a loose, brightly colored caftan, like the sort of thing you might wear over a swimsuit. Even though I couldn't see much of her face under the hat and her oversized sunglasses, there was something really familiar about her.

I felt like our eyes met, though her eyes were hidden behind those glasses, and then the crowd shifted and I lost sight of her. I'd have thought that hat would have made her impossible to lose, but it was as though she'd never been there. Maybe I'd imagined her. Or she was the ghost of a nosy neighbor who appeared whenever there was a nearby commotion. With a shrug, I headed down the alley toward where I'd left my car.

I was nearly to the end of the alley when it struck me who that woman was: If I wasn't mistaken, that was Florrie Marz.

Chapter Eleven

I froze in my tracks, shivering in spite of the summer afternoon heat. Had I really seen Florrie, or was it merely that I'd let her take up residence in my brain, so that I saw her everywhere? I had to be certain, especially if they were going to arrest her husband for her murder.

I turned and jogged back up the alley. I had to flatten myself against a fence when one of the police vehicles drove by. It looked like it was Wes driving, with Hugo in the back seat. For a moment, I wondered if I should flag Wes down and let him know what I'd seen, but I wasn't actually sure of what I'd seen. It wasn't as though they were going to execute Hugo for murder before sundown, I reasoned, so I had time to be certain before I said anything. After spending days telling everyone Florrie was missing and that something surely had happened to her, I couldn't exactly switch to telling people she was okay without being sure. It might not have been her. She'd said she had family in town, and she might have a cousin who looked a lot like her when wearing a hat and sunglasses.

My credibility was going to take a big hit if she was okay after all the fuss I'd been raising, but it would take an even bigger hit if I tried to say she was okay and turned out to be wrong. This was no time to spin stories or share my wild theories. I needed facts.

I made it back to where all the excitement was, and now that Hugo had been taken away, the crowd had thinned. There was no

sign of the woman I'd seen. Either she hadn't been there at all or she'd gone back home already. I got my reporter's notebook and a pen out of my purse and approached one of the remaining onlookers. "Excuse me, I'm with the newspaper," I said. "Would you like to discuss what you saw here today?"

The woman was apparently waiting for just such an opportunity and gave me a monologue about marital fidelity these days, lying, the foundations of a healthy marriage, and how people weren't what they seemed. I kept my pen moving, but I didn't even try to capture it all. I got a quote I might be able to use in the newspaper, depending on what the story ended up being. I didn't intend to write anything about a cheating husband if that's all there was to it. It would only go in the paper if Florrie was still missing by the time I went to press or if, God forbid, there was proof that something had happened to her. When the woman paused for air, I asked as casually as I could, "Did you know that woman who was out here who had on the big sun hat and the orange caftan?"

The woman frowned. "I don't recall seeing her, but I wasn't paying attention to anything other than what was going on."

I nodded. "Of course. Never mind. I just thought she looked familiar and I was trying to figure out why I knew her."

I thought about talking to more people, but I suspected that between Florrie's possible uncanny talent for going unnoticed and the excitement in Cissy's driveway, Florrie could have worn a penguin suit and done gymnastics in the alley without anyone noticing her. I'd have thought the bright orange caftan would be memorable, but I didn't know how her power worked, if people saw the clothes but forgot her or if she could make any clothing instantly forgettable.

I put my notebook back in my bag and began trudging down the alley again. I was feeling a bit lightheaded, either from all the excitement or from my brush with heat exhaustion, so I knew I needed to get back to the office to sit down in the air conditioning

and drink more water. I just hoped I could make it to my car without passing out, since Wes was no longer around to catch and carry me. I couldn't help but drift back to the memory of him carrying me cradled in his arms, nestled against his chest. A soft beep from behind startled me out of that daydream, and I turned to see one of the police cars stopping next to me. The window rolled down and Officer Thornton said, "Hop in. I'll take you where you need to go. You don't need to be walking any more in this heat."

It seemed Wes hadn't turned the police force against me, in spite of his occasional animosity. "Thanks," I said as I opened the passenger door. "My car's just at the end of the alley, so this is probably overkill, though I appreciate it."

"You gave us a bit of a scare earlier," she said, driving forward once I'd shut the door. "All this has been crazy, huh? It's like something out of a soap opera, or one of those TV movies."

Had I found a kindred spirit who shared my fondness for cheesy cable movies? "Yeah, that husband's really something. I thought it was bad enough when his wife told me he wouldn't let her come along when he went to a trade show in Vegas, but it's worse that he was here with an old girlfriend instead."

"Oh, you're the one who was the last person to see the wife?"

"Seems like it," I said. And if I really had seen Florrie in the alley, it was even more true.

We reached my car, and I thanked her again for the ride. It wasn't far, but I wasn't sure I'd have been up to it. My car was an oven after sitting out in the sun all this time, and the air conditioner had barely cooled it to a reasonable temperature by the time I got back to the newspaper building. I parked in my garage in the rear so the car would be shaded and entered the office through the print room.

Both Jean and Charlene looked up expectantly when I entered. "You were gone a long time," Charlene remarked. "And you don't look so good. What happened?"

"That cop must have really worked you over," Jean added.

I poured myself a full cup from the water cooler and drained it, then refilled it before collapsing into my desk chair. So much had happened that I had to think about what they knew. "They found the husband's car parked at his old girlfriend's house while I was talking to Wes at the police station, so I went along to the scene."

Charlene raised an eyebrow. "Hmm, sounds suspicious."

"That's what the cops thought, since the husband told them he was in Vegas when they called him about his wife being missing. They found the wife's purse, an earring, a shoe, and some rope in the trunk."

"Oh, Lord," Charlene said, pressing her hand against her heart. "That poor woman. They haven't found her, have they?"

I shook my head. "Not yet." I started to share my misgivings with them, but stopped myself before speaking. I felt like I needed to think first. It was bad enough that I'd stirred all this up in the first place. I couldn't shift gears abruptly. "They're bringing in the husband for questioning."

"So he wasn't in Vegas," Jean said. "What a rat."

"Yeah, he's in trouble for lying to the police."

"Are you okay?" Charlene asked.

"I did a bit too much running around in the heat without enough water, so I had a bit of a spell," I said. "I'm already feeling better." And that was true. Being inside had helped a lot. I'd need to start carrying water with me when I went out on stories in the summer. I'd taken off abruptly this time, but I'd need to be better prepared in the future.

Although my body was doing better, my mind wasn't at ease. The more I thought about it, the less sense it all made. Officer Thornton's remark about it being like a TV movie stuck in my head. That was exactly it. It was too neat, too obvious, but if you thought about it, it didn't make much sense.

I could see finding the earring in the trunk. It might have fallen off without being noticed. But who would leave one shoe in the trunk after disposing of a body or moving a captive to another

location? If they were going to dump her, they'd have dumped the shoe with her. Someone might have taken the wallet out of the purse, but then the purse itself would have been dumped, either with the body or in a trash can far away from the killer's house. Hugo didn't strike me as a Rhodes Scholar, but someone who'd come up with the idea to tell his wife he was going to a trade show in Vegas while he stayed with his girlfriend surely would have been cautious or paranoid enough not to leave his wife's belongings in the trunk of the car parked in his girlfriend's driveway.

Then again, he'd left his car parked in his girlfriend's driveway, so he wasn't too cautious or paranoid. But if he'd done away with his wife, would he have been that careless? A murderer would probably be terrified of being caught. He'd have washed the car and scoured the trunk to make sure he got rid of all the evidence.

Then there was the woman I'd seen—or thought I saw.

I felt like I was back where I'd been at the start of all this, having seen and spoken to someone no one else noticed and needing to figure out if she was real, a ghost, or all in my head. After spending the past few days trying to convince people that Florrie was real and possibly in trouble, I couldn't turn right around and try to convince them that actually she was okay and the whole thing was possibly a hoax, not if I wanted anyone to ever take me seriously again. If she was okay, she was safe. If she wasn't, I needed the police to be looking for her.

No, I needed to keep this to myself for now, until I'd found some kind of proof, one way or another. I just needed to figure it out before I went to press, so I didn't risk running a story that would be debunked right away.

Which reminded me, I did have a newspaper to put out. I needed to get to work. I pulled up my futures file to see what stories I had slated to cover. There was the back-to-school luncheon for teachers the next day, our town's equivalent of the event Florrie was supposed to have gone to before it was cancelled.

Jordan had yet another new business opening, a yarn shop downtown that would be run by the local knitting maven. I wondered if Charlene would be interested in that story. I knew she sometimes knitted at her desk between phone calls when she wasn't working on anything else. Or maybe I should look into that. It was a hobby that shouldn't involve running down alleys.

The phone rang, and Charlene answered it, spoke for a while with the caller, then said, "It's Evelyn for you," as she transferred the call. Evelyn Novak was the president of the newspaper board, so she was the boss who signed my paychecks. She was also Wes's grandmother. Needless to say, I had to stay on her good side for multiple reasons.

"Hello, Evelyn," I said when I picked up the phone.

"I understand you were present to report on that unpleasantness today," she said.

Wow, word really spread quickly, and I doubted Wes had told her anything. Either she had a source in the police department other than her grandson or she had a source in the neighborhood watch. My bet was on the latter. "You mean the missing woman whose husband was found at his girlfriend's house here in town?"

"Yes. I'm curious what you're planning to do with this story."

"I don't know yet. A lot depends on what happens before we go to press. If she's still missing, I'll have to run an alert so people can know to look out for her."

"That would be appropriate, though I hate to see it. It makes our town look unsafe, especially for women traveling alone." That made me wonder if Jordan had gotten to her. "But I also hate the idea of anything sordid and gossipy being reported in the newspaper, even if it does make it clear that this woman was only at risk because of her husband, and other women in town don't have anything to worry about."

"I don't think a cheating husband counts as news," I assured her. "I might mention that the husband is being investigated in conjunction with her disappearance in any story I run about a

missing woman.”

“That seems like a reasonable approach,” she said, sounding greatly relieved. “It sounds like you’ve got a good handle on the situation. Thank you. And let’s hope she’s found safe and sound before then.”

“Yes, that would be the best outcome,” I agreed. As I hung up the phone, I thought that gave me yet another reason to resolve things. I might like watching cheesy TV movies, but I didn’t want that kind of story in my newspaper.

I SPENT the rest of the day writing the neighborhood watch story. Since I was worried about my credibility, I couldn’t afford to skip it after telling everyone in the neighborhood plus Wes that I was writing that story. When I had a draft done, I uploaded the photos I’d taken with my phone. While I was getting shots of the police at work, I was pretty sure I’d also taken pictures of the crowd, and I thought I might be able to use those to illustrate the neighborhood watch story, since it showed them at work. Most of the pictures I flipped through focused on the police, but there was one showing the crowd behind the crime scene tape, and I recognized a couple of the people I’d interviewed on the front row.

Unfortunately, the woman in the hat wasn’t in the picture, unless that faint shape in the background, barely visible between two heads, was her hat. It was too vague for me to be at all sure. If it was the woman I’d seen, she was about the right height to be Florrie, but this picture wasn’t enough to convince even myself.

I looked through all the photos, but I hadn’t caught the woman in the hat in any other shots. Either she’d managed to always stay just out of frame, or she hadn’t shown up until later. Or she didn’t show up in photos. Could she have been a ghost, haunting her husband or possibly his car? Or had they dumped her body somewhere in that alley? That outfit didn’t strike me as the sort of

thing Florrie was likely to spend her afterlife wearing, but then Jean often changed clothes, which meant ghosts weren't stuck the way they'd died.

Still, I thought I ought to at least make certain I hadn't seen her ghost. If I had and she was willing to talk, I might learn something about what happened to her. I needed to rule out every other possibility before I told Wes I didn't think she was missing, after all.

That meant I needed to make a return trip to the alley that night, and at this time of year, I'd have to go fairly late for it to be dark. I thought for a moment about inviting Margarita, since it was her off night, but I felt like Florrie's ghost was more likely to appear to just me, and it would be bad form to tell anyone else about my theories as long as I wasn't telling Wes. He needed to be the first to know.

Later that evening, I was trying to decide what to wear—looking like a burglar would probably mean another call from the neighborhood watch, but I didn't want to stand out, either—when I heard a knock on my front door. A glance through the door's window showed Wes standing there. I felt a surge of adrenaline and couldn't tell if it was because of Wes or if it was the usual reaction to seeing a cop and wondering what I'd done wrong. There may have been a dash of guilt, though I reminded myself that I didn't actually have any information I was hiding from him. He was likely to say that all I had was theories, a story I was telling myself.

"Hey, what's up?" I said when I opened the door. "Two nights in a row must mean I'm really getting on your nerves."

He ducked his head, looking a little bashful. "I just thought I'd stop by to check on you. I was a bit worried about you this afternoon. I don't often have women faint in my arms."

It was my turn to duck my head. I couldn't believe I'd done that, though it hadn't exactly been planned and wasn't the sort of thing I was likely to plan. "And I don't often swoon like a damsel

in distress, but I'm fine. I probably got a little overheated. I need to be more careful in hot weather. Note to self: Drink more water. And there was the shock of seeing what was in the trunk. I know I'd spent days worrying that something horrible must have happened to Florrie, but then seeing those things . . ." I waited to see how he responded, and I was glad that I supposedly had some kind of shield against his ability, something to do with me having to be able to shut out ghosts.

"You've felt better since then? I probably should have sent you to a doctor to check for heat exhaustion."

"If I did have a mild case of heat exhaustion, I'm better now. Officer Thornton drove me back to my car, and I drank plenty of water when I got to the office. I stayed inside the rest of the afternoon."

"You still look a little flushed."

I pressed a palm against my cheek. It felt warm, but I suspected that was mostly about finding Wes on my doorstep, concerned about me. Apparently, he actually cared. "Well, it is a warm night," I hedged. Abruptly changing the subject, I said, "Hugo didn't do it, did he?"

I was surprised that he didn't hesitate at all before saying, "I don't think so. I don't have anything to charge him with, aside from lying to an officer and impeding an investigation, so he bonded out pretty quickly. So far, there's no body, no evidence of foul play. There's nothing to suggest a dead body was in the trunk of that car. It's pretty clean. Bodies make more of a mess than that."

"And if she was wrapped in plastic, then her earring and shoe wouldn't have fallen off into the trunk."

"Right." He shook his head. "I have to say, this case doesn't add up—or it adds up a bit too well. It sounds more like something out of one of those 'evil husband attacks woman in jeopardy' thriller movies. Hugo's a jerk, but he has no clue what's going on. And I probably shouldn't be discussing this case with you like this," he

said with a groan. "Is it too late to ask for this to be off the record?"

"I don't really have a story yet. I guess if she's still missing by the time I go to print, I'll run a story about her being missing and what's been found so far. Of course, if you find a body, that will be a story. Right now, there's not much to write about. A husband cheating on his wife isn't the sort of news I cover. I already had to reassure your grandmother about that."

"Good. Thanks. Did Florence sound at all like she suspected her husband of cheating when you talked to her?"

"No. She didn't even find it all that suspicious that he didn't want her coming with him to his event in Vegas. At least, not that she admitted to me, a total stranger. I think she was irked, but she didn't say anything about any suspicions about why he didn't want her there."

"Well, if she didn't know, and if she's still alive, she's going to find out. I don't think anyone is going to come out of this case a winner."

"Maybe she's okay," I said. "It'll be like you said, she's lounging by a pool, cut off from the world. And I can't blame her, given what her husband's like."

"Yeah." But he didn't sound too convinced. "Well, take care. You should get plenty of rest tonight."

For a moment, I thought about inviting him in, but then I remembered I had other plans. "Thanks. You too."

I gave him enough time to get to his house before I headed out. I decided to stay in the clothes I was wearing that afternoon, so maybe the neighborhood watch would recognize me and assume I was working on a story instead of calling the police on me. I drove down the alley, which was now empty. The crime scene tape was gone from Cissy's driveway. Her car was parked there, but Hugo's was gone. I drove past the driveway and stopped behind a fence, so I wasn't so visible from any of the surrounding houses. I killed the engine and opened the door, but stayed seated in the car.

“Florrie? Are you there?” I whispered.

Nothing happened.

“Is anyone there?”

I couldn’t help but gasp when I saw something shimmer in the air ahead of me. There appeared to be a ghost in the alley.

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Chapter Twelve

I hadn't actually believed that what I'd seen in the alley earlier that day was a ghost, but what I saw now was definitely one.

I got out of the car and eased the door shut so the dome light wouldn't show. The glowing figure was still there in the darkness. I moved toward it slowly, not wanting to spook it—which was rather ironic, when you think about it. As I drew closer, I could see that it didn't look like the woman I'd seen earlier. There was no big sunhat, and she wasn't wearing a caftan. The silhouette was wrong for Florrie, much younger and trimmer, but then her ghost could reflect her past self. Jean had been in her eighties when she died, but she usually appeared to me as a woman in her thirties.

"Hello," I whispered. "Is there something you want to say to me?"

The figure stood over a row of trash cans set against the fence. It turned to look at me, and I saw that she was the epitome of a fifties housewife from an old television commercial, right down to her ruffled apron over a full-skirted dress. "I can't seem to find him," the ghost said.

"Find who?" I asked.

"My son. I know he's out here."

This was definitely not the ghost I was expecting, but it sounded like there was a story here, even if it was an old one.

"What happened to your son?" I asked.

"I can't find him. I'm sure he did something to him and put him

out here. I have to find him. I should have saved him.” She moved like she was lifting the lids of the row of trash cans, peering inside, though she didn’t affect the cans that were actually there

I started to ask a question, but she seemed to see something in one of the phantom trash cans, wailed, and disappeared. It was a hot night, still unpleasantly warm even after sundown, but I shivered and goosebumps rose on my arms. I rubbed my arms as though trying to warm them on a cold day.

“Is there anyone else out there?” I asked warily. I probably didn’t give any other ghosts enough time to respond before I hurried back to my car and shut the door. Something about that woman had really given me the creeps. I was torn between wanting to look up whatever had happened with her and not wanting to think about her at all because the truth was probably pretty disturbing.

When I got home, I scooped a bowl of ice cream and covered it with chocolate sauce, then took it to the living room and turned on the TV, finding the sappiest romantic comedy movie that was currently airing. It was going to take some effort to get the look of despair on that ghost’s face out of my mind so I could sleep without nightmares.

It didn’t take much brainpower to follow the plot—the typical story of the woman returning to her hometown to save her family business and running into the guy she’d liked in high school, who was conveniently still (or again) single—so I found myself pondering the case I was working on. Tonight’s excursion wasn’t absolute proof that Florrie was still alive, but I figured that if her ghost had appeared in the middle of a crowd in broad daylight, she’d have turned up at night. If she was alive and if that was who I’d seen, then I didn’t think she was in danger. She’d watched her husband get busted and hadn’t stepped forward to clear him of suspicion. Had she been behind this all along?

She probably had the keys to her husband’s car, so she could have put her own purse, shoe, and earring in there. She could even

have smeared the blood so that someone would take a closer look at the trunk. Was she trying to frame him for her murder? It wouldn't do much good if she turned out to still be alive, and eventually someone was bound to notice that she was. Or was this her way of faking her own death so she could start a new life, and setting up her husband to take the fall, while she was at it?

Okay, that was an extreme way to create a narrative out of the meager facts. Even I had to admit that. But if she was still alive and okay, I was going to look pretty silly when she was found after all my efforts to convince the police she'd disappeared and was in trouble if I wasn't the one who found her.

The key to solving this was to find out where she was staying before the police did. I'd have to double down on pursuing that angle—when I wasn't getting a newspaper written.

I COULDN'T DEVOTE much time to figuring out where Florrie was the next day because it was the day of the school district's kick-off luncheon. I could probably have written the story without attending, since it was bound to be the usual rah-rah speech from the superintendent about having the best school year ever, but my job was as much about public relations as it was about actually writing, and being present at the event demonstrated my commitment to the community. My absence would have been noted.

Therefore, I was dressed up in one of Jean's vintage suits, which made me feel like the sassy girl reporter in an old movie, and sitting at one of the front tables in the junior high school's cafetorium while I took notes on the speeches. I was mostly taking notes to force myself to focus instead of zoning out and pondering the problem of Florrie. I was only partially successful.

If her luncheon hadn't been canceled, would Florrie have come to Stirling Mills later, or would she merely have driven back and

then returned? Her home was less than half an hour away. In city terms, that would just be an average drive across town. Would she have been reported missing earlier if the luncheon had happened and she hadn't shown up? People who worked with her regularly might have had more of a case than a reporter she'd met once.

I jerked my attention back to the event I was attending when a round of applause indicated that the high school principal had quit speaking. I hoped she hadn't said anything truly newsworthy that I'd missed. So far, this event had gone exactly the way I'd expected it to. The story I would have written without attending wouldn't have been very different from the story I'd write after attending. Before the next speech, the servers—members of a high school service organization—brought around the dessert, a peach cobbler that smelled divine. I wondered if this was standard cafeteria fare or something made especially for this occasion. As usual at luncheons, they offered coffee with dessert, discriminating against tea drinkers. I had my usual stash of tea bags in my purse, but I didn't think it was worth the effort to try to get someone to bring me boiling water that didn't taste like weak coffee. I could have a proper cup when I got back to the office.

Once the dessert and coffee had been served, the superintendent got up to speak. I started taking notes before she opened her mouth—the children are our future, best school year ever, blah, blah, blah. But instead of speaking, she began singing in a rich contralto voice. I didn't recognize the song, so it might have been original. It did say something about children and school. I started recording on my phone because this was definitely different. After the first verse, students appeared from the wings, singing backup. Then members of the marching band entered from the rear of the room. By the end of the song, the superintendent had urged the teachers to stand and join in the chorus. The whole thing gave me the good kind of chills. I wasn't a teacher, and I wanted to run out and educate the masses.

Now I had a story, something fresh and unexpected, something

I'd have missed if I'd assumed what would happen and skipped the event. There was an object lesson in there. I'd need to interview the superintendent about how it all came about and the work that went into the musical flash mob. Would that be a sidebar to the story about the luncheon or the focus of the main story? A sidebar could highlight the various student groups involved. The singers looked like they ranged from elementary to high school, so the whole district had participated.

"How was the lunch?" Charlene asked when I got back to the office after interviewing as many people as I could get to.

"The lunch itself wasn't bad. Is that cobbler the sort of thing they serve all the time?"

She chuckled. "Heavens, no. What they do isn't terrible, but you got the good food. They make it with canned peaches during the school year." I got the impression from her tone and expression that using canned peaches was some kind of sin. "And I bet the speeches haven't changed since my day."

"Did they sing them in your day?"

"Oh, Doctor Baker did her thing?"

"Her, the combined school choirs, and the marching band. What's she doing running a school district with a voice like that? She could be on stage at the Met."

"She's a soloist in our church choir. She can sing, but education is her real passion."

I took off my dashing fedora and poured myself a cup of real tea. "You know, if I'd thought about it, I should have sent you to cover this. You have a better background in that area." Charlene was a former teacher who'd quit to raise a family and now had gone back to work to get out of the house.

She shook her head. "Uh huh. You don't pay me enough to send me back to school. Besides, I wouldn't be objective enough to cover it." She stood and picked up her purse. "And now that you're back, I'm off to lunch. Oh, there was a message for you. I left it on your desk."

“Thanks. And take your time. I was gone long enough that I owe you for having to take a late lunch.”

“My husband’s cooking for me, so I may need that extra time.”

When she was gone, I sat at my desk and looked at the message slip she’d left for me. It was from the editor of the paper in the town where Florrie lived. I was sure he was calling to talk about that situation, but I wondered what, exactly, he wanted from me. With some trepidation, I picked up the phone and called the number he’d left. “Thanks for getting back to me so quickly,” he said when he answered and I identified myself.

“How can I help you?” I asked.

“I’m sure you know about our missing person.”

“Yes, I’m aware there’s an investigation going on,” I said, fighting to keep my tone neutral. I wondered how much he knew about my involvement.

“I was curious how you’re planning to handle it. I mean, is it a story yet?”

“It’ll depend on where things stand by the time I go to press Thursday evening. If she’s still missing then, I’ll run a missing person notice. Everything else relating to the case sounds more like gossip at this point.”

“You’ve got until Thursday? Lucky. I publish on Thursdays, so I have to get to the printer tonight, and that means things are likely to change by the time anyone sees this issue.” I was fortunate that Jean had invested her personal fortune in her paper, leaving a foundation that helped cover operating expenses and making sure we had our own press. That gave me a lot more flexibility.

“You’re probably better off calling the police directly to get the latest,” I said. “Lieutenant Mosby is your best source at the police department.”

“Yeah, I’ve talked to him. He wasn’t exactly forthcoming.” He’d definitely talked to Wes, then. “You don’t have anything else? Nothing about this husband being up to something shady?”

“I don’t run a gossip rag, so I don’t report on husbands being

shady. Right now, there's no real evidence that there even was a crime, so I'm not going to take any chances and run any allegations. At best, the husband is a person of interest."

"Oh well, it was worth a shot. I just wanted to make sure we're not contradicting each other. And it's not as though we're directly competing, so maybe we should share info."

"If I hear anything definite before your deadline, I'll let you know."

"Same here."

"Don't tell me some other editor is trying to horn in on your story," Jean said, materializing next to my desk as I hung up.

"We're not direct competitors," I said. "That paper is a good thirty miles away, and we probably don't have any subscriber overlap." Now that I thought about it, it could help during slow news weeks to do some kind of reporting exchange and call it regional news. I jotted a note on the message slip to remind me of the idea.

"Did he know anything about your missing woman?"

"Not that he shared. And I didn't tell him anything, either."

She draped herself across my guest chair. "You're not willing to blame the husband?"

"No, I don't think so. There's something that doesn't sit right there. The clues are all a little *too* obvious—the car left near the girlfriend's house with blood conveniently smeared near the door handle. The obvious blood on the husband's car. One shoe, one earring, a purse, and rope in the trunk. You might as well put up a sign saying, 'The cheating husband did away with her!' I'm sure that's what we were expected to think. It's all just enough evidence to get him questioned and expose his affair, but probably not enough to get the husband actually arrested. If he had killed her he'd have to be the dumbest criminal ever to abandon her car near his girlfriend's house instead of off in the middle of nowhere, and if he was dumping the body, why not dump the shoe and the purse there?"

“You know what it sounds like to me? Agatha Christie.”

I frowned. “I don’t remember that book, and I’m pretty sure I’ve read them all.”

“Not a book. Her life. Her husband told her he was divorcing her for another woman and went to one of those country house parties with that woman. Then Agatha disappeared. Her car was found near where the husband was with his mistress. He was questioned and the whole area was searched. It was in all the newspapers—the bestselling mystery novelist who disappeared. Someone finally spotted her at a nearby spa hotel, where she was registered under a different name. She said she was distraught and didn’t realize what was going on, but I always figured that lady knew how to plot, and she’d cleverly set it up to drag her husband through the mud. Thanks to her disappearance, everyone knew about her husband and the other woman. There was no chance of a discreet divorce.”

I could feel the pieces of the puzzle snapping together in my head. “You know, that’s the one explanation for all this that adds up,” I said, wrapping my hands around the tea mug and inhaling the vapor. Something about the smell of tea made me think more clearly. “She leaves her car—and her phone, so she can’t be tracked—near her husband’s girlfriend’s house and goes to hide out at the place she’s house-sitting. She’s not at a hotel, so her credit card can’t be traced. Then she disappears and waits for someone to notice. She probably has the keys to her husband’s car, so it would be easy to dump some of her things in there to be found. Once she’s sure everyone knows what her husband’s been up to, she can reappear and claim she’s been off the grid and blissfully unaware of all the fuss. I’m not sure how she’d explain her belongings being in the trunk. That may have been a desperation move when no one seemed to be doing anything. I don’t know that it would be a crime, though. She has legitimate access to the car, and putting her belongings in a family car isn’t a crime. She hasn’t filed any kind of false report. It’s just other people filling in the blanks and coming

to their own conclusions.” And I’d fallen for it, hook, line, and sinker.

“If that’s what she’s done, hats off to the lady. I admire a good vengeance scheme.”

“I bet her original plan was to not show for that luncheon so the people she worked with would notice she was missing, but then they cancelled it. I was probably her plan B.” I shook my head and sighed. “She wasn’t excited about being interviewed. She was excited about having something she was expected for that she could skip and someone would notice so she’d be reported missing. I bet she was getting really frustrated when nothing seemed to be happening. It’s rather sad, when you think about it, that she could vanish for so long without anyone noticing.”

“But you.”

“Yeah, and I played right into the scheme because I couldn’t resist connecting the dots to make up my own story, the way I thought it should go. If that’s what’s going on. It’s just as neat a story as every other theory I’ve had, and I have even less evidence than for any of my other theories. If I go to Wes with this, he’ll laugh me out of town. I’ve already told him too many tales.”

“Then you know what you need, don’t you?”

“Proof. I need to find Florrie.” And I wanted to do so before anyone else did. If I was going to be wrong about all my earlier assumptions, I wanted to be the one proving myself wrong.

Chapter Thirteen

I still felt the best way to find Florrie was to find where she was house-sitting. I'd already knocked on the doors of most of the houses in that neighborhood without any luck. I couldn't expect Florrie to come to the door while she was playing missing and waiting for her husband to get in trouble. In the jurisdiction of the town's most active neighborhood watch, I didn't dare peer over all the back fences, looking for her. If I was going to climb a fence and catch Florrie lounging by the pool, I needed to be sure I was at the right house first.

That call from the other editor gave me an idea. I wondered if Hugo's company knew anything about what was going on. If Hugo had a secretary, she might be clued in to his life. Hugo struck me as the kind of guy whose secretary managed his life for him and arranged things in cooperation with his wife. She probably booked his travel, made his reservations, took care of his calendar, and bought gifts for his family. Florrie had said something about him running an alarm company, so I looked up alarm companies in that town. There was just the one, and it was called Marz Alarms, which was a pretty good sign. I called from my personal cell phone so the newspaper name wouldn't show up on caller ID.

A woman with a deep Texas drawl answered the phone. Since I wasn't planning to quote her in the paper, I decided I didn't need to be up front about who I was. "Hi, I'd like to speak to Hugo Marz, please," I said.

"I'm afraid Mister Marz is out of the office this week," she said.

"Oh, is he at Alarm Expo in Vegas? I should have realized that."

"Nooo," she said, dragging out the vowel. "You know, it's funny, his wife thought he was going, but if he made any plans, they weren't through me, and I make all his travel arrangements. I'm not sure where he is. I only know he's taking some personal time."

I felt a little flutter of excitement. I wondered if the secretary had been the one to accidentally spill the beans, if Florrie had mentioned the trip to her and the secretary hadn't known anything about it. "This is actually a personal call," I said. "I was just trying to track him down. No one's answering the phone at their house. You wouldn't know where Florrie is, would you?" I hoped using her nickname would make me sound like a friend of the family.

"Oh, haven't you heard? Florrie's gone missing."

"No!" I said, faking a gasp. "I hope she's okay."

"So do I. I'm sure she will be. It's probably just a misunderstanding."

I thanked her for her time and ended the call. I didn't get a lot of information out of her, but my mental story was filling out. I imagined poor Florrie, sad that her husband didn't want her going with him to Vegas, mentioning it to his secretary and learning that he wasn't taking a business trip. She must have put two and two together and come up with her scheme.

I shook my head. I was doing it again, spinning stories. I needed proof, not more conjecture.

I went back to that list of bridesmaids and did some searches to track down where they were now. Maybe they were the kind of friends who'd ask Florrie to house-sit. Unfortunately, none of them lived in that neighborhood, and if I really had seen Florrie in that alley, that probably meant she was staying nearby. She looked like she'd left the pool and thrown on a cover-up to come out and watch the excitement.

I'd just wrapped up that research when Charlene came back

from lunch. She had a foil-wrapped plate with her that she brought over to the office refrigerator. "I thought you might like a little brisket. Royce was awfully proud of it. He's got a new smoker."

"Oh, wow, thanks!" I said.

"If he wants to take on the cooking as his retirement hobby, that's fine with me. What did that other editor want?"

"Gossip, I think. He has to go to press tonight and wanted to see how I was covering our missing woman."

She snorted. "It figures. He didn't know anything?"

"Not that he let on."

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

I stared at my scribbled notes around the list of bridesmaids. "If you needed a house sitter, who would you call?" I asked.

"Probably someone in my family. When you've got as many relatives in town as I have, you don't have to worry about finding someone. My problem is keeping them all out of my house."

If that was the case, I was in trouble. I'd have to track down all of Florrie's extended family, and that could be a challenge in a town like this with so many interconnections. And if there were so many connections, why bring in a relative from out of town? "If they were going to use family, I'd think it would be someone already in town. Other than family, who might you turn to?"

"Someone from church, I suppose. Or someone I worked with. I did once have a student teacher stay with me. She wasn't from here, and there was no point in her having to pay rent when I had a spare room."

"But she works in a different town and she's house-sitting here."

Then it occurred to me that the friend might have moved, and if she was new in town, she might have to turn to someone from out of town to house sit for her. I did a search for the name of the other town in the newspaper archives. Most of what I got was stories about school sporting events. It seems our two towns were big athletic rivals, or at least were in the same district so they

frequently played against each other. But on the third page of results, I found an item from the school kick-off luncheon two years ago. The story did the recap of the usual “best school year ever” speeches—nothing about a musical production number—but down toward the bottom it listed newly hired teachers. Two of them were recent graduates, but one of them came from that other town.

I had that “big story” tingle that made my hands tremble as I switched over to a search engine and looked for that person’s address.

“Bingo!” I said out loud. That teacher’s house was directly across the alley from Cissy’s house and, according to the satellite view, it had a swimming pool.

“What is it?” Charlene asked.

“I think I’ve found it. There was a teacher from that town who moved here a couple of years ago, and her house is across the alley from Cissy’s.”

“That’s convenient,” Jean said.

The question was, what did I do with this information? It still wasn’t really evidence. It was just a piece of data that backed up my current theory. I’d already rung the doorbell at that house, so I wasn’t going to verify that Florrie was there that way. I doubted she’d answer the phone there, either, especially not if she saw either my name or the newspaper name show up on the caller ID. She might come out again to see any further commotion at Cissy’s house, but I couldn’t stage that sort of thing. My best option was probably to look over the fence and catch her lounging by the pool. That sort of thing was borderline. If I was in the alley and not trespassing, I might be okay, but peeping over the fence would probably be frowned upon. Maybe there was a knothole in the fence I could look through.

Or should I tell Wes? This was the sort of lead he could follow up on. She’d have to open the door to the cops. I didn’t have to tell him that I might have seen Florrie in the alley behind Cissy’s

house. I could simply let him know I might have figured out where she was house-sitting, and he'd want to look into that, at least to verify whether or not she was there.

"I think I'm going to pass this on to Wes," I said, picking up my phone.

"You're cluing in the cops when you've got a scoop?" Jean asked.

"It's not really a scoop, and there's not much I can do with it. I can't make people answer when I knock on doors, and if I enter the backyard, it's considered trespassing. But it might be a useful tip, and he probably doesn't have the time to do the kind of research I've done."

Before Jean could argue, I hit Wes's name on my contacts. The call went to voice mail. At the tone, I said, "Hi, it's Lexie. I know you told me to stay out of things, but I did some research, and I think I may have found where Florrie's house-sitting. It's right behind Cissy's place." I gave the address before hanging up. "There. It's up to him what he wants to do with it."

"You didn't tell him you think she staged the whole thing?"

"She what?" Charlene asked.

"We think she's setting up her husband to out his affair," Jean said.

"I guess that's better than her being dead," Charlene said with a shrug.

"I didn't say anything to Wes because it's just supposition," I said. "He'd say I was writing my own story right out of some cheesy movie. If he follows up on it, he can figure it out for himself. I just hope he does it before that other paper goes to print and that editor runs a story about Hugo being suspected of murder."

By late afternoon, Wes still hadn't called back. He should have at least acknowledged the tip or asked questions about it. I'd left out enough information that I was sure he'd have to get back to me to know how I figured it out, and that way I could get his reaction.

“Maybe I could at least run by there and check,” I said. It was the kind of interference Wes hated. I would definitely be involving myself in the case, which could get me in trouble. On the other hand, it would be nice to be the one to actually expose Florrie’s scheme.

“Good thinking! You break this story wide open,” Jean said. Then again, if Jean was for it, it might not be the best idea ever.

“I’ll watch the phone,” Charlene said. That did it. If Charlene didn’t oppose it, maybe it was a good idea.

Since I was still dressed for the luncheon, I went up to the apartment and changed into khakis and a T-shirt, clothes that were lightweight and yet suitable for crawling or climbing. Remembering the lesson I’d learned the day before, I filled a sports bottle with water before I headed out. I didn’t want to pass out again.

I drove to that neighborhood and came down the alley from the direction that meant I wouldn’t pass the driveway where I believed Florrie was staying. I didn’t know how Florrie had known about the commotion in the alley, but I didn’t want to take any chances that there was a security camera over the garage door that would alert her to my presence. I stopped my car behind a fence between driveways and made sure my phone was on silent so an ill-timed call wouldn’t give me away before I got out of my car.

The fence was tall and solid. There was no way I’d be able to see over it without climbing on the hood of my car, so I hoped there was a knothole or a gap between boards, and then I hoped Florrie was enjoying her time by the pool rather than staying indoors with the air conditioning. Now that I thought about it, that seemed the most likely scenario. I was probably wasting my time. I could be comfortable indoors instead of in an alley where there was little shade and the heat was radiating off the concrete.

But since I was there, I figured I might as well check. If she wasn’t there, I could go home and leave it to Wes. I’d more than done my part, and if any delay meant Hugo got exposed in his

hometown paper, then that was his problem. He probably deserved it.

I walked along the fence, looking for any gaps. There weren't any. If I ever needed to build a fence in this town, I'd have to find whoever had built this one. They'd done good work.

I reached the end of the fence where it turned the corner to the driveway. If I rounded the corner, I'd be trespassing on the driveway, and I'd probably be in range of any security cameras that were there. Then again, it wasn't as though Florrie could call the police on me without exposing her scheme.

Now that I thought about it, it was a win-win scenario for me. I could get proof that she was hiding while she was presumed missing either by spotting her or by alarming her enough to call the police. I had nothing to be afraid of.

I took a deep breath and turned the corner. That was where I finally spotted what I'd been looking for, a knothole on the edge of a board, so that the gap between boards was larger in that one place, and if I stood on my tiptoes, I could see through it.

There was a large expanse of green grass at the rear of the lawn, and closer to the house was a rectangular swimming pool. A woman lay stretched out on a lounge chair set under a patio umbrella. Her face was hidden behind the book she held, but she was wearing the same caftan I'd seen the day before.

Unfortunately, that was no proof that it was Florrie. I thought her hair looked similar, but I needed her to look up so I could be sure. The problem was that anything I could do to make her look up would also make her notice me.

I held my phone to the knothole and adjusted it until I got a good view of her on the screen, then zoomed in as much as I could. It probably wasn't the sort of evidence that would convince the police, but I was pretty sure it was Florrie. I tapped the screen to take a picture.

I'd barely put the phone back in my pocket when loud, deep barks came from inside the yard. It hadn't occurred to me that

Florrie might have been pet-sitting as well as house-sitting, but it made sense. You hardly needed someone living at your house while you were gone unless there was something that needed looking after. I'd been worried about security cameras, but it seemed that this house had living security.

The barking drew nearer, and then there was a thud as the dog threw itself against the fence, trying to get at me. I ran down the driveway to the alley, and the barking followed me as I rounded the corner and hurried to my car.

I was almost there when a voice called out, "Stop right there!" It held the kind of command that was nearly impossible to disobey, and I instinctively paused. It was a good thing, too, since when I looked back at her, Florrie was pointing a gun at me.

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Chapter Fourteen

Fear rushed through me, leaving me feeling weaker and shakier than yesterday's heat and shock had. I'd gotten into some scrapes during my career and had confronted and even been targeted by killers, but I'd never before found myself staring down the barrel of a gun. The fact that the gun was being held by a matronly teacher wearing an orange caftan didn't diminish the fear. I knew just how desperate and upset Florrie had to be to have set up the whole situation that had led to this moment, so I didn't know what she might do.

That meant if I wanted to get out of this alive, I had to keep her calm—and then hope that Wes checked his voice mail, took my message seriously, and followed up on it. “Florrie, you’re okay!” I said. “I’ve been so worried about you. I’ve been looking everywhere in town for you.”

That took her aback enough that the gun barrel dropped ever so slightly, though it was still aimed at me. “You have?” she said.

“Yes! When you didn’t show up for our interview, and then you didn’t answer the phone, I got worried. You never know what might happen to a woman traveling alone. I didn’t know if you might have been in a car accident after you left the restaurant or when you were on your way to the interview, so I called all the hospitals. I called the police and tried to report you missing, but they didn’t think I had enough of a relationship with you to know you were really missing. And then I worried about you swimming

by yourself, since you mentioned that the place you were house-sitting had a pool. You might have had a cramp or something while swimming alone. So, I started looking for where you might be house-sitting. And I found you! Now that I know you're okay, I'll leave you alone."

As I spoke to her, her face softened, and I thought I saw a tear trickling from beneath her sunglasses. The gun wavered, and then she lowered it as I kept talking. I took my chance and reached for the car door handle, but the gun snapped up again. "I can't let you go, not now," she said. "You can't tell anyone where I am. If this story doesn't make it into the newspaper so that everyone thinks for at least a day or two that my husband killed me, then all of this will have been for nothing."

"But the newspaper doesn't go to press until Thursday," I said. "You can't hold me that long, and people will notice I'm missing long before then."

"Not your newspaper. I don't care what people here think about him, though it would be nice if his relatives start to doubt him. Our newspaper goes to press tonight, I know. And if I'm not still missing, there won't be any story at all. A cheating husband isn't news. A missing woman and a husband who's being investigated after he lied to police is news."

"You're not going to hide out forever, are you?" I asked. "They're going to find you eventually." I didn't think I'd actually be able to reason with her. I was trying to buy time for the eagle-eyed neighborhood watch to notice a woman holding another woman at gunpoint in the alley. If they'd all spotted the police activity the day before, surely they'd notice this. I regretted the decision to park where I didn't think I was in range of any security cameras. Now I hoped there was a hidden one, or maybe that periscope I'd wondered about.

"Of course they'll find me! I just want the article to run," she said, sounding exasperated. "Even if I reappear and he's cleared soon after everyone reads the newspaper, it will forever change the

way he's seen. They'll know he was cheating on me and lying, and even if he didn't actually kill me, that seed will be planted in everyone's minds."

And Wes thought *I* was bad about spinning facts and theories into stories. The lesson here was to never piss off an English teacher. They read enough to know how plots work.

"I did talk to that editor," I said. "He doesn't know anything."

"And it's going to stay that way. Now, I'll take that." She grabbed my phone out of my hand, then gestured with the gun for me to head back to the house with her. We got to the gate and she ordered, "Open it." She really was a conscientious house sitter if she'd taken the time to close the gate so the dog wouldn't get out when she went to confront the person who could destroy her entire scheme.

I lifted the latch with some trepidation. I could hear the dog on the other side, barking and growling, and I could only imagine what it would do to me when I opened the gate.

"Bowser, sit!" Florrie called out, and the barking stopped. I eased the gate open and braced myself as I stepped through.

The dog wasn't as intimidating as he'd sounded. He was a medium-sized mutt, the kind that had traits and coloring from just about every other breed. He looked like something that might have been cooked up in a mad scientist's lab, but his tail was working on overdrive, wagging so hard I thought it might dig a trench in the ground where he sat. The growling sound turned out to be a weird kind of purr that came between barks, and the barks struck me as friendly. He desperately wanted to greet me, but he was well-trained enough to stay where he was until he was instructed otherwise.

Florrie followed me through the gate and shut it behind her. "It's okay, Bowser," she said, then instructed me, "Let him sniff you, then pet him so he knows you're a friend."

Being ordered at gunpoint to pet a dog was certainly a new experience. I bent and held out my hand for Bowser to sniff, then

gave him a tentative pat behind the ears. He made that strange growling/purring sound again and licked my hand. I figured that meant we were now friends.

“Come on,” Florrie said. “You should probably get into the shade after what happened to you yesterday. It would really mess up my plans if I had to call an ambulance for you.”

We walked across the lawn to the pool deck, Bowser trotting at my heels, where she motioned for me to take one of the lounge chairs under the large canopy umbrella. She set my phone and the gun down on a table and picked up a pitcher of lemonade to pour a glass, which she handed to me. “It’s important to stay hydrated.”

I took the glass and sat gingerly on the edge of the lounge chair. Bowser flopped down at my feet and gazed up at me with adoring eyes. Apparently, I was his new favorite person. I couldn’t help but wonder why Florrie had a spare glass for serving lemonade when she was hiding out and not expecting company. Maybe it was second nature for her to bring out a pitcher and two glasses, or else she wanted to be prepared in case a bug flew into her glass.

She sat on her lounge and leaned back with a satisfied sigh. “You know, this has been the best vacation I’ve ever taken,” she said. “It’s been so relaxing to be out of touch with the rest of the world. No one’s making any demands on me. I stocked up on frozen dinners, so there’s been no cooking and not much cleaning up. There’s been nothing to do but lie by the pool and read.”

“And frame your husband for your murder,” I pointed out, possibly unwisely, considering that the gun was still within her reach.

“I wouldn’t have had to go so far if people had noticed I was gone. Do you know how discouraging it is to be able to totally fall off the face of the earth for days before anyone in your life notices? It seems the only person who cared at all was you, someone I’d talked to once. The plan was that my coworkers would check on me when I didn’t show up for the luncheon and get worried when

they couldn't reach me. The police here would find my car, and then they'd find Hugo's car nearby. But then the luncheon got cancelled and I had to come up with something else I could miss."

"And the interview with me was the perfect opportunity."

"Yes. I was so glad I met you. But then I missed that, and nothing happened. The car didn't seem to alarm anyone, even when I went out and put some blood on the door handle."

"Someone did call the police about the car, and I noticed the blood and pointed it out to the police."

"But they didn't do anything about it! That night I put my purse, shoe, and earring in Hugo's trunk, along with some rope, and I cut my hand and left a bloody print. Surely someone would notice that!"

I wondered if she was the prowler the neighbors had noticed and called the police about, and it wasn't Margarita and me, after all. "Your daughter reported you missing on Monday," I told her. "She noticed you were gone."

"Finally! It took three whole days before it occurred to anyone that I was completely unreachable. You notice my husband didn't seem to care. I don't think he even tried to call me."

"Still, this all seems a little extreme," I said. "You could have just left him."

She gave a bitter laugh. "If he'd asked for a divorce, I think I'd have been okay with that. I would have made sure I got my share of the assets, but I wouldn't have fought him or made it hard for him to go. But he didn't just cheat. He lied. He made a fool out of me."

Feeling like a hostage negotiator on a TV show, I said, "That must have been difficult." As long as she was talking, she wasn't shooting at me, so I felt I should encourage her to talk.

Her voice cracked as she said, "It was terrible. We haven't always had the best marriage. He's had his world and I've had mine, and he's cheated before. I'm used to being forgotten and invisible. It's not just Hugo. But that night at his class reunion, it

was the worst I've ever experienced. He and his old girlfriend were all over each other, like no time had passed, even though I was *right there*. It was like he not only forgot I was there, he forgot I'd ever existed."

She took a long sip of lemonade, put the glass down, and said, "I'm hot. Do you want to get in the water?"

"I'm not exactly dressed for it."

"You can put your feet in the water. It'll help keep you cool. The shallow end's in the shade at this time of day. And I want to swim, so you're coming with me."

As I followed her to the edge of the pool, I considered running for it, but I wasn't sure I could get to the gate before she could get to the gun. It wasn't as though I was suffering. As long as we were sitting by the pool and talking, I supposed there was no harm in staying. I hated the thought that the other newspaper was likely to run an inaccurate story, but at the same time, I could kind of see Florrie's point. I didn't have a huge problem with Hugo's reputation getting trashed. My sympathies were with the other editor, whose paper was going to be outdated even before it came off the press.

While Florrie pulled off her caftan and made her way down the steps into the pool, I slipped off my shoes and rolled my pants up to my knees. I sat on the edge of the pool and let my feet dangle in the water. I had to admit that it felt good. It would have been nice to be able to get in the water. Maybe the next time I decided to conduct surveillance on a house with a pool, I'd put a swimsuit on under my clothes.

Florrie sank down into the water until it was up to her shoulders and half-stood, half-floated. "The Vegas trip was what really made me mad," she said, continuing her story. "It was bad enough that he acted like I'd be a burden if I came along, even though it would only have cost my airfare and meals and I wouldn't have minded being left alone. But I felt like such a fool when I mentioned it to his secretary and she had no idea what I

was talking about. I knew Hugo couldn't make travel reservations for himself to save his life, so I knew something was up."

"Yeah, that is pretty fishy," I said. "But how did you know he was going to stay with Cissy?"

"Where else would he be going?" she asked with a shrug. "It was pretty obvious he was doing something he didn't want me to know about. For one thing, he locked his phone. We have the same model, and we'd always used them interchangeably. We both had the passcodes to each other's phones. One day I picked up his, thinking it was mine, and none of the codes I knew worked. And while I was holding the phone, a message from Cissy came in. I couldn't read the whole thing on the lock screen, but I saw enough to be suspicious. That was when I did some research. Someone I used to work with had moved to Stirling Mills, so I called her to chat, and it turns out she lives directly behind Cissy. She was about to go out of town on a cruise just before teacher inservice started, and she mentioned needing someone to look after her dog. It was the perfect chance, so I volunteered. I suppose I could have hidden out anywhere, but it was nice to be able to keep an eye on Hugo while I was at it."

"And so you pulled an Agatha Christie," I said.

Her face lit up. "Yes! You get it! I knew I liked you. I'm a big fan of her books, and I've always been intrigued by that story. Of course, we don't really know if she actually planned to set her husband up, but it seems likely to me. Hugo's the one everyone remembers, the guy with the personality. I think half my friends don't remember me if they're not looking right at me. Our mutual friends invite him, and I come along with him. If we just divorced, he'd be the one who ended up with the friends. I'd be forgotten. If I wanted any kind of life, I'd need to make sure sympathies were with me."

"So you framed him."

"Technically, I don't think it counts as framing. I haven't accused him of a crime. There's no crime to accuse him of. I put

my own belongings in a car I have every right to have access to. If people assumed something bad based on the evidence, that's not my fault. I'm planning to reappear as soon as the newspaper comes out, so he'll never be charged with a crime."

"Other than lying to the police and impeding an investigation," I said.

She laughed. "Really?"

"Yeah. He gave the Vegas story when the police called him after your daughter reported you missing."

"And then they found him here with Cissy. Oops." She giggled.

"It didn't look good for him."

"He walked right into it. Lying will make them even more suspicious of him."

"They're already pretty sure he didn't do it."

"What?" She slapped her hands against the surface of the water, splattering me and the deck around me. Bowser heaved himself up from where he was lying and came over to flop down next to me.

"You may have overdone it with the evidence you planted. They figure any killer dumping a body wouldn't have left the shoe and the purse in the car. The earring might have worked, since he might not have noticed it."

She nodded. "Good point. I should have thought of that."

"And there are no signs of a dead body having been in the trunk. If you'd been wrapped in plastic, the shoe and earring would have fallen off in the plastic."

"Oh well, it wasn't like I was trying to get him convicted of murder. I just wanted people to see him being put in a police car outside his girlfriend's house, and I got that."

"You know that holding me prisoner here is a bigger crime than he's committed, so they're also going to see you being put in a police car. Is it worth it?"

I thought for a moment I was going to have to dive in and rescue her because she stumbled and fell underwater. She came up, sputtering, a moment later. "Oh, God, no. I didn't think of that. I

just couldn't let you ruin everything. I wouldn't have shot you. There aren't even any bullets in the gun, though I don't think that matters if I made you think there were bullets. I'm so sorry." I couldn't tell if it was the water on her face or if she was crying, but her shoulders shook violently.

I knew Wes would probably be annoyed with me for this, but I said, "I don't have to tell anyone. Just come clean. I'm sure word will get back to your hometown, whether or not the story about your husband ends up in your local newspaper. I'm not even sure I can make it back to the office in time to catch that other editor and tell him what I've found. I don't have his number with me." This was actually the truth. I'd called him from the newspaper's landline, so I couldn't reach him until I got back to the office. I'd feel bad for him if he got the wrong story, but I wasn't deliberately holding out on him.

"Really? You're not going to tell anyone? Oh, thank you. Thank you so much. I mean, I already owe you for trying to report me missing. You've paid more attention to me than most of the people in my life, including my husband." Now I felt really bad for her. I didn't want her going to jail, not when she'd come up with such a clever way of getting back at a cheating husband. She made her way to the steps and climbed out of the pool. "I'll get you a towel so you can dry off before you put your shoes back on." She hurried over to the lounge chairs, leaving puddles in her wake, picked up a beach towel and brought it to me.

"I have told the police that I thought I found where you were house-sitting," I admitted as I pulled my feet from the water and turned around to dry them. "They may be coming to check on you, and I think you should answer the door when they do. This has gone on long enough."

With a deep sigh, she said, "You're probably right. Anything beyond this would be pretty malicious. I have what I wanted. Again, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have brought out the gun. Desperation really does make people do dumb things, doesn't it?"

I've always been so critical of characters in books and movies when they do dumb stuff, but now I think I get it. I must have completely lost my mind. Do you want some more lemonade before you go? Or what about staying for dinner? It's been nice having a few days to myself, but I have to admit, I've enjoyed having the company just now."

That was quite the reversal, going straight from holding me prisoner to inviting me over for dinner, but there was such raw, naked need in her eyes that I couldn't say no to her. Besides, it was either that or having to cook for myself. Even if I ate the brisket Charlene had brought me, I'd have to at least make a salad to go with it. "Sure, dinner sounds nice," I said.

"We can eat out here by the pool. But I guess it's still early for dinner. If you're hungry now, I've got some watermelon for a snack. I'll go get that." She pulled her caftan back on and went into the house.

I finished toweling my feet and legs, rolled down my pants legs, and put my shoes back on before I stood. This was my chance to leave. She was in the house, and I knew I could get back to my car and be well away before she came back outside, especially now that I knew the gun wasn't loaded. But I didn't feel like I was in any danger, and if I was here, that would keep her from doing anything else stupid. As angry as she was at her husband, him being just across the alley was probably a massive temptation, and she had that gun.

I went back to the lounge chair and sat down. Bowser followed me, and I gave his ears a good scratch before I picked up my lemonade glass and poured a refill. This was a nice backyard. I wouldn't mind spending a vacation at a place like this, with a swimming pool all to myself. Come to think of it, I didn't know how vacations worked in my job. The newspaper had to come out, week in and week out. Did I get vacations? Did we ever do a double issue and skip a week? I had flexible hours and nowhere to go right now, so I didn't feel the loss of vacation time, but at some

point I might want to go somewhere. I figured I might as well enjoy myself at the moment, since this was the closest I was likely to come to a getaway this year.

Florrie came back out with a bowl of watermelon. “Here you go,” she said. “I cut it up like for a fruit salad because it’s easier to eat that way.” She placed the bowl and a couple of smaller bowls on the table. “Serve yourself.”

As I picked up the spoon, Bowser jumped up and ran to the back of the yard, barking. I looked up just in time to see Hugo burst through the gate. “Aha! Caught you!” he shouted.

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Chapter Fifteen

Florrie's back was to Hugo, and she whirled to see him. "Hugo!" she yelped. Bowser also yelped and ran back to me.

"I can't believe you've been hiding out here all this time," Hugo said with a snarl. "Do you know what I've been through?"

"Yeah, and that was pretty much my plan," Florrie said. "It's too late to try to sweep this under the rug. Everyone knows what you did. The newspaper's already gone to press. The whole town will see the story tomorrow."

He raised a gun. "Well, if I'm going to go down for killing you, I might as well do it."

That seemed like a rather extreme response. Now would have been a great time for Bowser to come to our rescue and lunge at Hugo, like the service dog belonging to Ruthie, the artist across the street from the newspaper office, had once done to save me from a killer. But Bowser was cowering behind my legs. I could feel him trembling. He must have been a rescue dog who'd been traumatized by abusive behavior. It looked like I'd have to save him.

"Whoa, you're not going down for anything other than lying," I said, standing and moving to Florrie's side, my hands raised so I wouldn't appear at all threatening. But that meant I was looking down the barrel of a gun yet again. Twice in one afternoon was definitely a record for me. This was not a habit I wanted to get into. "Lieutenant Mosby told me he didn't think you did anything

to Florrie. I mean, other than lying to her and cheating. And I already told him I found her. He knows she's okay, that there was no crime." That was stretching the truth a bit, but I didn't think that anything said at gunpoint counted as a lie. "But if you shoot her, you'll be in real trouble," I added.

Unfortunately, my assurances didn't have the effect I'd hoped for. He didn't lower the gun. "They found her things in my car," he said. "She set me up."

"Yes, but she's obviously alive," I pointed out to Hugo. "As long as she stays that way, no one's going to arrest you for murder because there is no murder. If you kill her, then they will get you. They're already watching you. You'll be the first suspect because you have a motive that everyone already knows about."

"But they know I didn't kidnap her, that those things were planted, so maybe when she dies, they'll think it was someone else," he said, sounding like he was desperately grasping at straws. It didn't look good for Florrie if he was rationalizing what would happen if he killed her.

"There's a witness," I reminded him.

The gun moved toward me. "Not necessarily."

Things had taken a serious turn rather quickly. I couldn't help but glance toward the gun on the little table between the lounge chairs. True, it was unloaded, but he didn't know that, and maybe I could scare him off. I was careful not to move my head so that maybe he wouldn't notice my glance, but the moment he aimed his gun at me, Florrie turned to look at her gun and took a step in that direction. Hugo couldn't help but notice the movement, which meant he noticed the gun.

"Uh-uh," he said, shaking his head. "Both of you move away from it, now."

Florrie and I moved a few steps sideways, closer to the pool. I wondered if jumping in the water would do any good. It might be harder to aim at something underwater, and the farther apart Florrie and I were, the harder it would be for him to shoot both of

us. On the other hand, any sudden movement was likely to startle him and, as edgy as he looked, he was likely to pull the trigger as a reflex. Bowser came along with us, still cowering behind me and whimpering softly.

“I’m disappointed in you, Hugo,” Florrie said, sounding remarkably calm for the circumstances. I supposed a teacher had to be good at deescalating tense situations, and she was certainly using her “teacher” voice. I felt like I was back in school. “I wasn’t too surprised to find out you were lying to me and cheating, and I know you’ve cheated before, but I didn’t think you were the kind of person who’d stoop so low as to get violent. Our marriage wasn’t great, but I was never afraid of you, until now.”

“Really? Then why did you make it look to everyone like I’d tied you up and thrown you in the trunk of my car?”

“I just wanted someone to notice,” she shouted, her voice shrill with emotion. “I wanted people to know about you, what you were doing, and since no one even noticed I was missing, I had to try harder to make them look at you and see what you were up to.” She took a couple of deep breaths, then shook her head sadly. “I don’t know why I expected better. No one ever sees me. We lived in the same house for more than twenty-five years, and I think you always forgot I existed the moment you weren’t looking at me. Maybe that’s why you cheated. When you were out with other women, you totally forgot about me, so I guess you thought you were a free agent.”

This was Hugo’s cue to contradict her, to tell her he hadn’t been cheating all along, that his current affair was something different and special, a reconnection with someone who meant a lot to him, a realization that he should have been with Cissy all along and he couldn’t help himself. But apparently he hadn’t seen any of the movies I had and he really was a jerk because he said, “And that’s my fault? Maybe if you made yourself more exciting, I wouldn’t have forgotten you.”

“Don’t you think I tried?” Florrie said, the last word bubbling

up into a sob. My heart went out to her. I didn't think she knew anything about her talent, so she must have gone through life feeling utterly invisible and not understanding why. "I don't know how many makeovers I got. I tried every hair color the salon offered, and you didn't even notice when I dyed my hair bright red. I bought sexy lingerie. I tried perfume. You didn't notice any of it, so I gave up. Why bother remaking myself to please you when nothing got your attention?"

"You dyed your hair red?" he asked, his forehead creasing as he tried to remember. "When was that?"

"Three years ago, during the winter holidays, before the Chamber of Commerce New Year's Eve party, the one where you left me alone and spent the whole night flirting with the new beauty salon owner—the one who dyed my hair. But don't worry, no one else noticed, either. None of my students said a word when school started again after the break. You also didn't notice when I went blond the summer before that."

"I'd have remembered blond," Hugo said, shaking his head.

"Nope. You didn't notice. I have pictures, if you want to see them. Then there was the blue phase, just to see if anyone said anything, but I didn't like it, so I changed that quickly. Supposedly, it was against the school dress code, and yet no one cared."

"Now you're pulling my leg," he said with a scoff. "You've never had blue hair."

"I have pictures of that, too. Do you know how it feels to be invisible to your own husband? It was like you didn't even want me in your life."

"This is about Vegas, isn't it? You were mad that I didn't want you coming along."

"No, it's not just about Vegas," she screamed. I hoped maybe the neighbors would hear the fight and do something. She went on more softly, adding, "Though I was mad about that. It's not as if you would have noticed whether or not I was there, but at least I might have had some fun. The thing I'm mad about is that you told

me you were going to Vegas but instead you were shackled up with your old girlfriend.” She gave a bitter laugh. “I guess that explains why you didn’t want me going to Vegas with you. You might not notice me, but I’d have figured out that you weren’t there.”

“How did you even find out? No one knew.”

“Seriously? *That’s* what you’re worried about, how I found out? I’m a reasonably intelligent woman, Hugo. I found out you hadn’t made any travel plans for Vegas, and I saw you at your reunion with your old girlfriend. I did the math. And then I saw your car in her driveway.”

“I told her she should have cleaned out her garage so I could park inside,” he muttered.

All of this was interesting and probably therapeutic for Florrie, but I was still facing the barrel of a gun and wanted to get out of this situation as soon as possible. “Why don’t you put the gun down so we can discuss this like civilized people?” I asked Hugo. “You’re scaring the dog.”

“Yeah, Hugo,” Florrie said. “That dog is a traumatized rescue. That’s why Alice needed a house sitter. She can’t board him and she can’t leave him alone. You’re setting back his recovery.”

“I can’t believe this. You’re worried about the *dog* at a time like this?” Hugo said with a sneer that made me want to slug him.

“Yes, I’m worried about the dog because *I’m* not a terrible person, Hugo.”

He gave a sharp, short bark of a laugh, which made Bowser whimper again and lean his weight against my legs. “*You’re* not a terrible person? You set me up to go to prison for murder!”

Florrie gave an exasperated sigh. “Don’t be so dramatic. I just left some vague clues that someone could interpret as being suspicious. As soon as the newspaper back home came out with a story about me being missing and your car with evidence in it being found at your girlfriend’s house, I was planning to make sure everyone knew I was okay. Since they towed my car, I was going to call the police about my car being missing, and I’d be surprised

that there had been all that fuss about me. You wouldn't have been in trouble at all if you hadn't lied to the cops, so don't put that on me."

"And then what? You think you'd get a better deal in the divorce?"

"Maybe not in court, but in town, yes. They'll all know what you did, why we split up. And then maybe I'd be able to keep the friends. I know how things go. If we'd just split up quietly, you'd have glad-handed everyone while they all forgot I existed, and then I'd have ended up utterly alone, even though you were the one in the wrong. I wanted to make sure everyone knew so I'd get all the sympathy."

It sounded as crazy when she said it like that as it had when she'd explained her plan to me earlier, but knowing what her uncanny talent probably was, I could understand her desperation. What would it be like to go through life feeling utterly invisible, to worry that the people you cared about might forget you existed the moment you were out of sight? If she got away with blue hair at school, she must really have it bad. I wondered if maybe there was a part of her that was afraid of being seen and that ramped up her power. It would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. I'd remembered her because she wanted me to notice when she went missing.

But I could analyze her talent and how it worked when I wasn't being held at gunpoint. At the moment, the bigger concern was getting Hugo to put the gun down and relax before he hurt someone. I didn't want to have to write the story of a murder I'd witnessed. It was bad enough finding a body after a murder. I most certainly did not want to witness one.

"Come on, Hugo, what would Cissy think about this?" I asked. "She reunites with her first love, only to lose him when he goes to prison for murdering his wife. That would really suck for her, wouldn't it? But if you let us go now without anyone getting hurt, the worst you'll face is a fine or maybe probation."

"But what if no one knows I killed her? They already think

she's missing and don't think I had anything to do with it, regardless of what the newspaper says. No one has to know she died later."

This guy was a real piece of work. I had to wonder what Florrie had ever seen in him, unless it was the fact that he saw her and remembered her long enough to marry her—before he forgot her again. "The cops here are smarter than that," I said. "They'll know. And if you shoot her here, the neighbors will hear it. Have you heard about the neighborhood watch around here? They know everything. You wouldn't be able to get her body away from here without them noticing. The only way out of this for you is if you just turn around and leave, and we can all pretend this never happened."

"Then I'll be a laughingstock," he said. I thought he was wavering, but it was hard to tell since I didn't know him.

"That's worse than being a murderer?" Florrie asked. "Even if they don't ever officially tie this to you, you know people will always assume you did it. You'll never escape from that if I don't turn up safe and sound."

I saw movement out of the corner of my eye, coming from the house. Wes must have finally shown up and kicked the door in. Rescued at last! I forced myself not to look because I didn't want to alert Hugo, who was so focused on Florrie that he didn't seem to have noticed.

But when the approaching figure came into view, I saw that it wasn't Wes. It was the ghost I'd seen in the alley the night before, still dressed like a 1950s housewife, from back in the day when these houses were new. In the late afternoon daylight, she was nearly transparent, but I could still tell that she was furious, and she was heading straight for Hugo.

It was a pity that I was likely the only person present who could see and hear ghosts because she would have made the perfect diversion. If he did get distracted enough for me to be able to take action, I wondered what I should do. He was a lot more

solid than I was, so I didn't think I could tackle him and wrestle the gun away from him. Trying that would be taking a big chance. I needed another plan. I glanced around as well as I could without moving my head, looking for anything I could use as a weapon. There was a long-handled skimmer lying beside the pool, I recalled. If I could get to it, I might be able to knock the gun out of his hands from a distance. I thought it might be long enough to reach. If I got in the water, I could squeeze against the side of the pool for cover.

But it was probably a moot point because Hugo didn't seem to see the ghost at all, even though she was right on him. "Leave women alone!" she shouted, her voice coming out as a howl. I couldn't help but wince at the sound.

Hugo didn't hear her, but when she got close enough to touch him, he shivered visibly. "Is a front coming through?" he asked, looking around.

That meant he took his eyes off us, so I dove for the pool. I grabbed the skimmer on my way over the edge into the water. Hugo was still flailing around as the ghost tried to wrestle with him. "Florrie, take cover!" I called out, sweeping the skimmer around to hit his legs. The skimmer wasn't heavy enough, and I didn't have enough leverage, to get in a good blow, but it distracted him still further, so I was able to whack him on the wrist and make him drop the gun.

Meanwhile, the ghost seemed to be working out her issues on him, shouting things like, "Don't hurt women!" and "I hate men!" I was definitely going to have to look up the story of what happened in this house when I got back to the office, assuming I survived.

I tried to get the skimmer net around the gun to pull it away from Hugo, but I wasn't very good at controlling the skimmer, and Hugo recovered his composure more quickly than I'd expected. He picked up the gun, yanked the skimmer out of my grasp, and looked around for Florrie, who'd taken cover behind one of the lounge chairs, Bowser at her side. She was reaching for the gun on

the table, and I hoped she'd remember that it wasn't loaded. If she and Hugo had a shootout, she'd lose.

Now that Hugo was armed again, I slid deeper into the water so that my head was below the edge of the pool. He'd have to come over to the pool to get to me, which might give Florrie time to run into the house. But which of us would he go for first, the witness determined to thwart him or the wife he was angry at?

A quick peek above the pool showed that he was heading for his wife. The ghost was still taking out all her frustrations on him, with the only effect being to make him shiver. He was focused and determined, and I couldn't think of anything to do to stop him, short of tackling him, myself.

I couldn't let him kill Florrie, so I boosted myself up on the side of the pool and dragged myself out of the water, then sprinted across the lawn to jump on his back and wrap my arms around his neck. The ghost joined me, and he shouted, "I'm definitely going to kill you, too!"

Chapter Sixteen

I didn't think Hugo could shoot me while I was clinging to his back, and I hoped he wasn't a good enough shot to be able to aim at Florrie while the ghost and I were distracting him, but I didn't know how long I could hang on.

Bowser jumped up and ran toward us. I thought for a moment that he was going to join in and help defend me, but he ran past us toward the gate. I didn't dare turn to see who might be there. Given that Bowser had noticed me when I was outside the fence, he could have been running because someone was in the alley.

But someone in the alley could help. This was, after all, the neighborhood watch hot zone. "Put down that gun!" I shrieked at the top of my lungs. If that didn't bring some kind of help, this neighborhood would have to give up its watchfulness reputation.

A moment later, I heard Wes say from behind me, "You heard the lady. Put the gun down."

I wanted to go weak with relief now that the cavalry had arrived, but I couldn't afford to until Hugo surrendered, so I kept my grip on him. Still, I felt a lot better knowing Wes was there.

Hugo froze, but he didn't put the gun down. "If you've got a gun, you can't shoot me without shooting the girl on my back," he said.

"True, but anything you do now, you'll be doing in front of the police. Do you really want to do that?" Wes said.

Hugo slowly turned around and saw Wes standing there, in

uniform, his gun pointing at him. "Oh," Hugo said.

"Lex, let the man go so I'll have a clear shot at him," Wes ordered.

I released my grip on Hugo's neck and slid down his back to the ground. My feet squelched in my wet shoes as they took my weight once more. My legs were a little shaky in the aftermath of all the excitement, so I probably wobbled as I moved farther away from Hugo.

"Ma'am, I would prefer that you didn't," Wes said to Florrie. "I've got this under control." I glanced over to see that Florrie was reaching for her gun. She looked up at Wes, then backed away, raising her hands.

Hugo finally seemed to realize he was beaten. He bent and put the gun on the ground.

"Kick it to me," Wes said, and Hugo did so.

That was when more cops came running through the gate. Bowser barked once and ran to me, keeping my legs between him and the men. Wes instructed the cops to take Hugo into custody, and they handcuffed him and hauled him away. I felt a lot better once Hugo was gone. That was when I finally allowed myself a sigh of relief.

Wes holstered his gun and turned to face me. I braced myself for a scolding but was entirely unprepared for the raw emotion I saw on his face. He looked truly concerned. "You okay, Lex?" he said, his voice rough.

"Yeah, more or less," I said. "Wet, mostly."

Florrie grabbed a towel from the nearest lounge chair and brought it to me. "Here you go, dear. You were so brave. I think he might really have shot me if you hadn't stopped him."

Wes must have regained his equilibrium because he had his usual exasperated tone when he said, "Now, could someone tell me what happened here that led to Hugo Marz holding a gun on you?"

"Wes Mosby, meet Florrie Marz," I said as I blotted my dripping hair with the towel. "She's been here all along. Hugo figured that

out and decided that if he was going to be accused of her murder, he'd really do it."

"He wasn't going to be accused of her murder," Wes said, frowning in confusion. "There was no evidence."

"Exactly what I told him. He wasn't convinced."

"Why don't we all sit down to have this conversation?" Florrie said. "I'll get another glass, and we can have some lemonade." Wes started to object, but she interrupted to say, "I won't go anywhere, I promise. Besides, you towed my car. I wouldn't get very far."

While she went inside, I went to sit on one of the patio chairs and took off my shoes so they would have a better chance of drying. Fortunately, they were nylon slip-on sneakers, so the water wouldn't do them any harm. Bowser stuck beside me.

"You sure you're okay?" Wes asked, taking the chair beside me.

"I'm fine. I take it you got my message."

"Yeah. Plus the neighborhood watch called about a strange car parked in the alley."

"I was hoping that might happen."

"I'd have preferred that you let me handle it."

"Well, you didn't call me back, and I needed to make sure she was here before the paper in her town went to press with a story about her being missing. I was perfectly okay until Hugo showed up." Well, sort of, but I'd decided I wasn't going to say anything about what Florrie had done. I supposed it wasn't that different from what Hugo had done, but her gun wasn't loaded and she'd given up on her own without me tackling her. She'd also apologized and seemed contrite. Hugo had doubled down on the awfulness.

Wes bent to pet Bowser, but the dog whimpered and slunk under my chair. "I think he's afraid of men," I said. "Florrie said he was a rescue. He's the reason her friend needed a house sitter." To the dog, I said, "It's okay, buddy, he's a friend."

Wes leaned over and offered a hand for the dog to sniff. A moment later, the dog came out of hiding and tentatively

approached Wes, wagging his tail. Wes gave him a good scratch behind the ears, and if I hadn't been sitting down, I might have gone a little weak in the knees. I already knew Wes was a good guy, but this was another positive sign. Even a traumatized dog trusted him.

Florrie returned with fresh glasses and another pitcher, served us all lemonade, and then she told her whole story about what she'd learned about her husband and her plans for dealing with him. The two of us then tag-teamed on telling about Hugo showing up, angry and with a gun. Florrie shook her head sadly. "I never intended for it to go this far. I didn't think he'd get into any real trouble. I only wanted everyone to know about him cheating. There wasn't any crime, so there was nothing for him to be arrested for, was there?"

"I have to say, this is an unusual situation, but if he hadn't lied to me and if he hadn't threatened you, there wouldn't have been any crime. He was the one who reacted badly, and that was what got him in trouble," Wes said.

"I knew he was a jerk. I had no idea he could get violent. And I don't know where he got a gun. We don't have one."

Wes glanced at the one sitting on the table, next to the lemonade pitcher.

"That's Alice's. It's not loaded. I'm here by myself, so I felt better having it there."

"In the future, I would recommend not having a gun you're not prepared to use," Wes said. "It's as likely to get you shot as it is to scare anyone away."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said. Hesitantly and a little bashfully, she asked "Am I in any trouble?" She gave me a quick sidelong glance that I hoped he didn't catch. I kept my face perfectly neutral.

"There's not really anything I can arrest you for, since you didn't make any false reports. All you did was put some of your own belongings in your own vehicle and stay out of

communication. Not that I endorse what you did.”

“Is it up to me whether to press charges? Because I won’t. I honestly didn’t want him to go to jail, and I did provoke him. I think he may have learned his lesson.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, but maybe sitting in a jail cell for a while would cool Hugo off.

“We’ll discuss that later,” Wes said. He finished his lemonade, bent to pet Bowser one more time, then stood. “Thank you for the lemonade. Now I have some paperwork to do.”

“Won’t you stay for dinner?” Florrie asked.

“Thank you, but no.”

“Lexie, what about you?”

I glanced down at my wet clothes. “I guess I could stand to dry off before I drive home.”

“Before you eat, you’ll need to move your car out of the alley,” Wes said. “That’s one reason the neighbors called. The alley is narrow and you’re partially blocking it.”

“Do you think you could move it into the driveway for me?” I asked, taking the keys out of my pocket and handing them to him. “I’d rather not sit on the upholstery right now.”

He took the keys and went through the gate, returning a moment later to give me the keys back. “Thanks,” I told him.

“We’ll talk later,” he said, and he was so deadpan that I couldn’t tell if I was in trouble or if he wanted to hang out.

Oh, who was I kidding? I was in trouble. I might even have deserved it.

FLORRIE GAVE me one of her caftans to wear so she could run my clothes through the dryer while we ate dinner. It ended up being not a bad evening, sitting by the pool, eating dinner, and chatting. When she wasn’t angry or distraught, she turned out to be intelligent and funny. The people who ignored her were missing

out. I wondered if there was anything she could do to counteract her power. As we finished our meal, I asked, "Do you know anything about the history of this town?"

"Not really. I never lived here, and my parents seemed to be glad to get away. Why?"

"This is going to sound weird, but there's something related to the town's history that might explain your thing with people not noticing you. You should talk to some of your local relatives." I wasn't up to trying to convince someone that there were people in the town who had uncanny abilities they'd inherited from an eerie sideshow, but she needed to know. "If your relatives don't know what you're talking about, call me. I know some people who might be able to explain it."

"You've got me intrigued. But for a while, I might not mind being invisible. I'm not sure what people are going to think about all this. There's a good chance that they'll be as mad at me for putting Hugo through all that while I was perfectly safe and sound the whole time as they are at Hugo for lying to me and cheating on me. That's the way things tend to go for us."

"I guess going unnoticed is good when it comes to scandal or embarrassing moments."

"If only I knew how to turn it off and on. Most of the time, I'd prefer that people notice me."

That was where I hoped her relatives could help.

When I was dressed once more in dry clothes and my shoes were mostly dried out, I went back home, where I was met by an anxious ghost. "Where have you been? Charlene tried to call you."

"I know. My phone was full of messages. It was on silent while I was creeping around. I did call her back when I got a chance after all the excitement."

"Excitement? I take it you found your missing person."

"Yeah, and even more than that." I gave her a quick recap of events, then asked, "Do you know about a woman, probably in the fifties, who died from what might have been domestic abuse?"

There may have been a child involved, too.”

Jean nodded, and her form shifted slightly so that she looked older, middle-aged, and wearing one of those slim suits from the fifties. I wondered if that one was in the box of old clothes in my closet. “I’ll never forget that case,” she said, her face solemn. “Her child was found dead in the trash in the alley, and she was accused. Back then, if something happened to a kid, the mother got blamed. But then she ended up dead in just about the same way. I always figured the husband killed both of them, but he spun some story about an intruder coming while he was out, and they believed him. He didn’t even go to trial. He remarried within months, but they moved out of that house pretty quickly and left town. Why? What did that have to do with all this?”

“I think Florrie was house-sitting at the house where it happened. The ghost saved us. She really did *not* like a man threatening women. She wasn’t able to do much to him, but I think he felt her presence, and that distracted him enough for me to do something. I wonder if I could do a follow-up story to clear her name.”

Jean surprised me by shaking her head. “No. There’s no one left in town connected to them, and you won’t find any evidence other than the ghost. She may have gotten some peace from saving you two tonight.”

“I hope so.”

“And people wonder why I never married,” Jean said before vanishing.

I’d just taken a shower and put on clean clothes when I heard a knock at my door. I was pretty sure who it would be, and I was right. Now the question was, was I in trouble or was this visit friendly?

“I wanted to make sure you were okay,” Wes said when I opened the door.

“I’m fine. I wasn’t ever really in danger, I don’t think.”

“That’s not what it looked like when I found you clinging to a

guy with a gun. Why did you go there, anyway?"

"I just wanted to check on whether she was really there. I thought I saw her in the alley yesterday afternoon."

"You saw her? Why didn't you say something?"

"I wasn't sure. I asked some of the other people there, but it was like Thursday night at the restaurant, when no one else seemed to see her or remember her. After all that time I spent trying to make you believe she was missing, I didn't feel like I could tell you she wasn't missing without any proof. Since I was wrong in the first place, I felt like it was up to me to set the record straight. And then Hugo showed up. I did not anticipate that."

He shook his head. "I still can't believe she was right there, across the alley, the whole time."

"She was planning to reappear after her local newspaper went to press. Oh no, the newspaper!" I said with a gasp, remembering that other editor. It was way too late now.

"What about the newspaper?" he asked, not following my train of thought.

"The one in her hometown. He goes to press tonight, so he's going to have a story about her being missing and her husband being taken in for questioning after being found in Stirling Mills with evidence in his car. I didn't think to let him know in time."

"That's what she wanted. And having met Hugo, I'm okay with giving her that one."

"After this afternoon, me too. But I feel bad for the other editor, since the truth will be out before his paper gets delivered."

"It'll probably be his biggest selling issue ever."

"Probably. Unfortunately, I won't have anything to run, since there was no crime and she's not missing anymore. I guess my lead story will have to be the superintendent's musical flash mob."

"Yeah, I heard about that. Must have been something. Well, I just wanted to make sure you're okay." He started to go, but turned back. "Are you sure there's nothing you haven't told me about all this that I need to know?"

This was where dealing with someone who could read minds got tricky. Supposedly, I had barriers he couldn't get past, but I didn't know how solid they were and if they worked all the time. Was he just guessing, or did he somehow know? Florrie, I realized. He must have read Florrie. But there was nothing he could do legally based on reading someone's mind. "Nothing," I said. "I've already told you everything. Repeatedly. You've complained about how much I was telling you."

He nodded. "Okay, then. Take it easy. You've had a rough couple of days." His voice was flat, without any feeling or enthusiasm.

"I have a paper to get out. I can't take it easy until Thursday night."

"You could maybe try to avoid heat exhaustion or being held at gunpoint for at least a week."

"I can't make any promises."

He smiled, but I had a sense that he was disappointed as he left. He knew I'd lied to him. I'd been so worried about my credibility after trying to convince him that Florrie was missing, but now I might be destroying whatever credibility I had with him. "Wes, wait!" I called out, catching him halfway down the stairs. He stopped and turned back, coming up to the landing again. Looking him in the eye, I said, "There was something that happened, but I don't want to go on record with it. There was no harm done and I don't want anything to come of it."

The smile he gave me made me feel like I'd passed some kind of test. "Thanks for telling me. I feel better knowing you're okay with it."

"You're not going to do anything?"

"I can't, not if you don't tell me officially. You're sure you don't want to do that?"

"Very sure."

"Okay, then," he said, nodding. He gave me the kind of grin that made my heart feel swollen, like it was going to burst out of

my chest. I thought of about a dozen things I'd like to say in the moment, but my tongue was paralyzed and I missed my chance because he gave me another nod and headed down the stairs. I watched him go, feeling like something important had passed between us, though I wasn't quite sure what.

But I certainly looked forward to finding out.

LEXIE'S ADVENTURES continue in *Secret of the Haunted Hotel*.

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